QUIETDALE
(William and Caroline Robinson Residence)
401 Quietdale Drive Northeast
Huntsville
Madison County
Alabama

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240
QUIETDALE
(William and Caroline Robinson Residence)

Location: 401 Quietdale Drive Northeast, Huntsville, Madison County, Alabama

Quietdale is located at latitude: 34.75705, longitude: -86.573919. The coordinates represent the center point of the house and were obtained from Google Earth on April 4, 2018. There is no restriction on their release to the public.

Significance: The Robinson family, their relatives and intimate associates have bequeathed Huntsville an enduring legacy of buildings beyond the Robinson house, familiarly known as Quietdale, that enhances the city’s built environment and provides a living connection with the city’s beginnings and early settlement patterns. The 1981 National Register nomination by Robert Gamble states: “Quietdale is a lucid example of the mid-nineteenth century shift in American architecture from an unalloyed neo-classicism to the freer forms of romantic eclecticism. Its design combines elements from both schools, retaining the basic form and proportions of neo-classicism while incorporating details which express the newer trend in architectural fashion. Thus, superimposed upon a symmetrical five-bay façade—the chief motif of which is a restrained entablature—is an ornate wooden porch composed of a series of shallow Tudoresque arches that carry eaves bracketed in the Italianate fashion. The same pattern is repeated in the architrave framing the inset doorway, as well as in a secondary porch extending along the west side of the house….Quietdale is significant as one of the earliest expressions of this impulse anywhere in the Huntsville area. Moreover, it is one of the few suburban mid-nineteenth century mansions to have survived the city’s later expansion.”

Description:

Site: Quietdale, the antebellum country house of a wealthy cotton planter, sits on 6.2 acres on the north side of Quietdale Drive and the east side of Christian Lane. To the east is a residential subdivision and on the west side of Christian Lane is an active line of the Norfolk Southern Railroad. When constructed, the house was on 55 acres that extended west to Meridian Street. The yard is predominantly flat and landscaped with mature shrubbery and trees. The house is sited to the southwest, slightly off center of the lot, and faces south. Directly to the north of the house, and slightly east, is the two-story kitchen/slave quarters attached by a new brick patio to the main house. The residence appears to be in sound structural condition. The former slave quarters exhibited significant rot and water damage, and renovation of it had begun in 2017 but
is now stopped. Two early twentieth century barns, both near collapse, occupy the far north end of the property.

Main Dwelling, Exterior:
Quietdale is a two-story, five-bay, late Greek Revival frame house embellished with two Italianate-influenced verandas and topped by a truncated hip roof. It retains the neoclassic rectangular profile but with a northwest ell that forms one side of a two-story, L-shaped rear porch. The house is unusual in that it is clad with beaded wood siding instead of the typical brick used for antebellum construction in this region. All windows are six-over-six, double-hung units; only those on the front façade retain blinds. The roof is clad with new composition shingles and boxed eaves, while the unglazed monitor is metal. There are five exterior brick chimneys, two located on the east façade, two on the west, and one on the north, all secured by chimney brackets and now painted black. The chimneys are almost flush with the exterior walls, having only a few inches of the stacks extending beyond the walls. A one-story veranda on the front façade, a similar one on the west façade, and a double-story porch on the north façade have standing-seam metal roofs. The continuous brick foundation, also painted black, is laid in a running bond with typical antebellum foundation vents of vertical wooden bars set diagonally within heavy cedar lintels and sills. A wide, plain entablature board transitions between the siding and the roof on the main block. The south façade measures 60' across by 45' deep, while the ell measures 31' deep by 20' wide.

The front veranda extends across three bays shielding the entry from the sun. It is accessed by unpainted brick semi-circular steps (installed in 2017) and is supported on six octagonal columns along the front with two matching pilasters, one at each corner, against the house. The columns taper towards the top and are connected by shallow Tudoresque arches. An intricate, scroll-work bracket bridges the top of each column, two on each corner, connecting it to the roof overhang. The veranda ceiling is remarkable for its unusually ornate plasterwork. A floral band runs around the outer perimeter, while a stylized grape vine motif occupies an interior band of ornamentation. A large chunk of ceiling plaster has fallen from the west third of the ceiling, leaving the lath exposed. The foundation is poured concrete that has been painted black.

The main entry retains the Greek Revival arrangement of sidelights and transom while incorporating newly fashionable Italianate elements. A pair of two-paneled doors is recessed below a shallow Tudoresque arch supported on ornate square pilasters and capped with a single scroll-work bracket supporting a shallow hood. Sidelights and a broken-transom light surround the doors. Sidelights are composed of three stacked vertical panes secured by muntins. The transom is centered above the door while the broken lights fill the space between the transom and the sidelights. All glazing is dark red and etched to show the clear glass beneath the glazing, except for the transom. The sidelights and two corner portions of the transom display an etched grapevine design. The center portion of the transom has “Quietdale” and the date “1854” surrounded by a narrow band of red glass etched with a grapevine pattern around the perimeter. The previous owner, Ira Jones, installed this glass. When the Niles Prestages occupied the house, the entry transom had been a single pane painted in a repeating pattern of green and gold, which raises the question whether the ruby sidelights are original. (It should also be noted that the circa
1850 Whitaker-Motlow house in nearby Mulberry, Tennessee, also has a ruby glass transom and sidelights.) Wrought-iron security doors are installed on the front.

The west façade has seven bays. They are not evenly spaced; those towards the front of the house have tighter spacing and do not have sufficient wall space between the windows to allow for fully open blinds (although these blinds have been removed). Fenestration on the upper level from the north is a pattern of four windows, chimney, three windows, chimney. Fenestration on the bottom level varies only with the three bays between the two chimneys, where the center bay is a single, four-paneled door beneath a transom of three panes of glass: one colored red, one cobalt blue, and one deep gold. The veranda is accessed from the yard by a new set of black brick steps centered between two low pedestals. The veranda is basically identical to the one in front and features six octagonal columns along the front and two matching pilasters at the house. The ceiling is smooth plaster and does not have the ornate filigree of the front. It exhibits signs of substantial repair work. A wrought-iron railing has been added between the columns. The veranda is supported on brick piers with a pierced checkerboard pattern between each pair; earlier photographs reveal recessed panels of open brickwork in a diamond pattern between the piers.

The rear (north) façade has two planes because the house is L-shaped in plan with the reentrant angle occupied by a two-story porch. The north wall of the ell is largely covered by the wide chimney and two windows, one above the other on the west side of the stack. The east ell wall facing the porch features two doors with transoms on either side of a window on the first floor and two windows and a door on the second. The roof of the ell terminates in a hip.

The two-story L-shaped porch is supported by six slender Tuscan columns on each level and is 12’ wide. The flooring on the first floor has been replaced, and the crawl space under the porch was once screened with contemporary lattice but is now exposed. A spiral ironwork stair was installed toward the east end to connect the two porch levels as was a matching rail of iron balusters on the upper floor in 2017; there is no rail on the first level. The ceilings were originally plaster or beaded board but are now contemporary panels with battens. All the exterior doors to the porch are four paneled with transoms. A long, raised brick patio installed in 2017 is one step below the rear porch and connects the house with the porch of the detached slave quarters. A new, unpainted set of brick, semi-circular steps was built on the east side of the patio to provide access to the yard. Elements of the rear porches, including bannisters, columns, stairs, and ceilings, have been modified over the years but the structural configuration is original.

The north facade of the main block abutting the porch has three windows and a door on both levels, but not in the same order. All windows are six-over-six except one four-over-four unit that replaced an earlier door. Two narrow gabled dormers face north; each has one nine-over-six double-hung window. The dormers appear to be original. Three solar panels were installed atop the dormers and roof monitor.

The east façade of the house, beginning at the south end, has a window, chimney, window, window, chimney, window, and porch on both the first and second floors.
QUIETDALE
HABS AL-1000
(Page 4)

Main Dwelling, Interior:
Quietedale retains a Greek Revival layout with an entrance hall running through the center, two rooms on either side, and two rooms in the ell at the rear. The house has most of its original wood floors, plasterwork, trim, and doors. Generally, the molding is most intricate in the public rooms on the first floor and simpler in the family quarters and the upstairs. It is not uncommon to have different trim designs in the rooms. Baseboard trim is tall, with a simple profile on the bottom and more complex on top. There is no shoe or quarter-round molding. Crown molding is only found in the front foyer, the two first-floor parlors, and the family dining room. All the other rooms are devoid of upper wall trim. Door molding features a variety of fluted profiles. Most corner blocks on the doors have a bull’s-eye design. Windows on both floors have a simple box-paneled molding beneath them. Fireplaces extend several inches into the rooms due to the predominantly inset chimney stacks. Most of the mantels are a simple Greek Revival style with fluted pilasters and plain entablatures, except for those in the east parlors. The ceiling height on the main floor is 13'-10" while that on the second floor is 11'-10".

Aside from the pocket doors between the parlors on the east side, the door between the two bedrooms on the east side of the second floor, and the doorway leading to the west porch hallway, the doorways have transoms. They are glazed with two pieces of abutting clear glass to span the width. The transoms provide only light and must be completely removed from their frames using a wing-nut latch on either side to provide ventilation. Interior doors on the main floor are four-paneled units, while those upstairs are primarily two-paneled Greek Revival and most have the original hardware. Door knobs are a standard nineteenth-century terracotta with white glazing. Door knobs in the front hallway are an unknown silver-colored metal. Most of the woodwork is painted.

The double front doors open into a large foyer where simple crown molding defines the perimeter of the room, and an ornate plaster medallion with an abstracted floral design anchors the center of the ceiling. The medallion has radial symmetry with four abstract botanical designs radiating out from the center, each capped with foliage and small roses. Acanthus-styled foliage divides the final medallion into an eight-pointed star.

The east foyer wall has a single door opening into the front parlor, a large formal space with two windows on the south wall and two on the east wall flanking a white marble mantelpiece with a rounded opening and cartouche. The firebox holds a vintage, round-topped, coal-burning insert installed when coal replaced wood. Simple crown molding defines the perimeter of this room, and an ornate plaster medallion with an abstracted dahlia design anchors the center of the ceiling. The medallion has radial symmetry with twelve main petals creating the face of the dahlia, which is then surrounded by twelve lily and scroll designs. A final garland of small plaster roses rings the outer portion of the medallion. Large three-over-three-paneled pocket doors divide the front parlor from the rear one.

The northeast parlor is almost identical in size, plan, and decorative elements to the front one, except the two windows on the north wall look onto the rear porch. A door on the west wall of the room leads into the stair hall.
The door on the west side of the entrance foyer opens into what is assumed to have been a family parlor. This room has two windows on the south wall, and a fireplace located in the center of the west wall with one window to the north. The mantelpiece is a plain Greek Revival design executed in wood with fluted pilasters supporting an unadorned entablature while a simple coal-burning insert fills the firebox. The only remaining call bell of eight is mounted to the side of this fireplace. A door on the north wall of this room opens to the side hallway that accesses the west veranda, the main stair hall at its east end, and the dining room on its north side.

The dining room has a low chair rail and simple plaster crown molding, complete with vertical sections on the architrave that read very much like dentils. The frieze is plain while the cornice line for the crown is convex. A coal-burning fireplace on the west wall is flanked by a window on either side; the firebox is surrounded by contemporary white tiles while the wooden mantelpiece is similar in proportions to the one in the family parlor but unfluted. The dining room has two additional doors, one on the east wall that opens to the stair hall, and one on the north wall that leads to the rear ell. This is the only room in the family portion of the house that has crown molding.

The rear ell has a small hallway providing access to a bathroom/laundry room with a west-facing window, to the rear porch, and to the current kitchen, which may originally have been the formal dining room. The kitchen has two windows on the west wall and a window followed by a fireplace on the north wall with a vintage built-in linen press or china cabinet on the east side. The fireplace is wood burning with a Greek Revival mantelpiece and “Dutch” painted tiles surrounding the firebox. A door on the east wall leads to the rear porch. A low, plainly profiled wooden chair rails surrounds the perimeter of the room. The plainness of the molding contrasts starkly with the door and window trim and woodwork in other rooms on the main floor; it may have been added later.

On the foyer’s north wall are two doors that open into the main stair hall, a necessity when the hall originally consisted of two identical stair halls, each isolated from the other. Even after the double stair halls were combined and modified to contain just one staircase, the two doors were retained. Today the staircase runs up the west side of the hall to a full-width landing across the north wall, then up a shorter flight on the east wall to the second floor. Two windows, high in the wall above the landing, open onto the upper hall. A square post below the landing supports the center of the span. The balustrade consists of two plain rectangular balusters per step and a rounded rail that ends in a knob atop a turned newel tapering to the top. The stair wall has inset vertical panels beneath an open-string with flat scroll brackets. Stair treads are unpainted. A stair under the west flight leads to the basement where a coal furnace was installed years ago and vented out the ell chimney.

The upper hall has one door on the east wall, one on the west, and two on the south. The east door opens into a large sitting room, likely a former bedroom. This room has an exterior door and window on the north wall to the second-floor rear porch followed by a window, a fireplace and a window on the east wall, then a door along the south wall connecting to the southeast bedroom. This northeast room has a wood-burning fireplace with brick hearth and a simple wood mantel.
The southeast bedroom has windows flanking a fireplace on the east, two windows on the south wall, and a door on the west wall providing access to a small vestibule. The wooden fireplace mantel is identical to the one in the adjoining northeast room except the hearth and surrounds are of narrow subway tile glazed a brilliant mottled green and white. These two rooms are assumed to be bedrooms, but they could have functioned as a ballroom before the 10'-wide pocket doors were replaced with a single hinged door. The vestibule adjoining this room has a door to the hall on its north wall and a door to a closet on the south wall. The closet is in the shape of an inverse L and is windowless.

From the central upper hall, a door on the south wall opens into a narrow interior hallway that provides access to the southwest bedroom and to a small bathroom that had been a closet with a window on its south wall. This bedroom has two windows on the south and a window on the north side of the fireplace on the west wall. The fireplace has a brick hearth and cast-iron fireplace screen. The mantel with its fluted pilasters and plain entablature is similar, but not identical, to the other mantels on this floor.

From the upstairs hall, a door on the west wall leads to a north-south hallway and to the narrow and steep attic stairs. A substantial portion of the attic has been finished with plaster walls, simple block molding, and trim. A door on the north wall leads to the unfinished area of the attic. A narrow dog-leg stair on the west wall provides access to the roof hatch. In the center of the attic is a square, brick column roughly 12” on a side that extends through the roof deck; it appears to be a vent but is not connected below the attic so its function and date of construction remain a mystery.

The north-south hallway also provides access to a small office or bedroom with a fireplace on the west wall flanked by two windows.

The north end of the hallway terminates in a small vestibule with an exterior door on the east wall to the rear porch, a door to a small bathroom on the west wall, and door to the bedroom on the north wall. The bathroom is carpeted and has all plumbing stacks on the south wall. There is a sink, shower/tub, and toilet, with a single window on the west wall. The bedroom has two windows on the west wall, one window and fireplace on the north wall, and two windows on the east wall. The fireplace hearth is brick, and the fireplace mantel has fluted pilasters and a plain entablature, similar but not identical to the other bedroom mantels on this floor.

Main Dwelling, Alterations:
The exterior of Quietdale is remarkably intact with original siding and windows. In 2017, the exterior was painted a pale lilac with two darker shades used on the trim. All the doors are red. Like most buildings constructed before modern plumbing and electricity, the house has seen numerous updates to accommodate new technologies and changes in social dynamics. Some of these alterations are quickly evident, such as the conversion of former storage rooms into bathrooms, the addition of an interior kitchen, and the installation of electrical wiring, while others are merely suspected and cannot be proved without additional primary source documentation or selective demolition.
On the exterior, major changes include the removal of the shutters, except on the front, the 2017 addition of the spiral stair on the rear porch, and changes to the transom and possibly sidelights. The most significant interior alteration with the removal of the double stair hall. A door opening on the east side of the second floor was altered at some point as well.

The design of the room, combined with the age and style of the house, suggests that a balustrade might have crowned the house. This is a minor exterior element that can easily rot over the years, and because the roof has been re-shingled multiple times, it would be very challenging to find definitive evidence of an original balustrade.

Local tradition describes the ruby-colored transom and sidelights as “witches’ glass,” a security feature considered necessary for the detection of flying witches. This superstition likely is derived from the regional popularity of employing colored witches’ balls and bottles to capture evil spirits—or witches. However, the glass around the front door is a sophisticated form of etched glass invented in 1832 by Friedrich Eggermann in Czechoslovakia that utilized a copper sulfate solution. His production technique was kept secret until stolen in 1840, after which the glass became famous throughout Europe and the United States. It would have been available at the time of Quietdale’s construction, but no documentation has surfaced revealing that this glass was installed in the 1850s; nor is there any documentation that it dates from a later renovation. A description of the house written in the 1930s by Pat Jones makes no mention of red sidelights and transom, although a 1952 description does refer to burgundy glass surrounding the front door. Replacements for damaged panes were installed in the late twentieth century by owner Ira Jones, as was the current transom pane. Evidence of the interior transoms confirms that the transom would originally have consisted of more than one pane.1

Like many antebellum houses Quietdale’s original kitchen was a separate structure. It is not known when the current kitchen room was co-opted for that use, although Pat Jones states that it had been moved inside by the 1930s.2 A small section of metal 1950s-era cabinetry in the northwest corner indicates that the current kitchen space may have been used for that purpose for sixty-five years or more. The far north end of the rear porch, that portion abutting the current kitchen, was enclosed for a utility room at an unknown date, but that addition has been removed and the porch restored.

Door knobs in the entry foyer are all a silver-toned metal. Oral histories claim that the door knobs are silver, although that could not be authoritatively determined at the site visit. The rim locks for the knobs are stamped “Russell & Erwin MFG. Co.” Headquartered in New Britain, Connecticut, the Russell & Erwin Company was founded in 1839. The name of the company changed a few times, but in 1851, it was named Russell & Erwin MFG. Co., and it was known under that name until 1902. Period hardware catalogues from the company show several steel

---

1 Colored entry glass is not mentioned in Virgil Carrington (Pat) Jones, True Tales of Old Madison County (Huntsville, AL: Johnson Historical Publications, 1992), 75-81. Virgil Jones was city editor of the Huntsville Times (1931-1937), and his articles would have been written in the early 1930s. The entry glass being burgundy is referred to in Glimpses into Ante-Bellum Homes of Historic Huntsville, Alabama (Huntsville, AL: Huntsville Branch American Association of University Women, 1952), 21-22.

2 See Jones, True Tales, 81.
and nickel options, although the exact knob profiles could not be definitively matched. Further investigative work could help determine if the door knobs are silver and/or original to the front hall. Door knobs on the back of the rim locks are white glazed terracotta.

The most significant interior alteration was a complete remodeling of the interior stair hall. As built, the stair hall was two enclosed halls on either side of a support wall running north/south through the center of the current stair hall. The guest staircase ascended the east wall after a landing, while the family staircase ascended the west wall in the same manner. When the dividing wall was removed and the dual staircases reworked to create a single stair beginning along the west wall, the doorway in the west hall to be shifted to accommodate this change. The door frame was moved to the south but lacked sufficient space for a full width of side and top framing on the southern side of the door. As a result, the top casing is truncated, while the side casing is entirely missing. Reconfiguring the two stair halls into one allowed for the removal of the exterior door to the rear porch that originally served the guest portion of the house; it was replaced with the only four-over-four window. The reconstruction date for the stair hall renovation is unknown.

On the second floor, the most significant alterations beyond the reconfigured stair hall, now open through both floors, were the conversion of a former trunk room into a bathroom (directly centered on the south wall) and the removal of a pair of 10'-wide pocket doors that once divided the upstairs guest parlors. A dressing room or storage room in the ell portion of the house now serve as a bathroom.

Slave Quarters, Exterior:
The former slave quarters have been extensively remodeled over the years, primarily inside, and in late 2017, the building was partially dismantled. The siding and windows were removed as were the interior walls and fixtures, leaving the roof, porch, north wall cladding, and framing intact. The east and south sides were wrapped with plastic, but the west side was left exposed, except for the protection provided by the porch.

This structure measures 54' north-south x 28' with 10' of the width being a full-length porch along the west façade. It faces west and is a rectangular two-story building originally clad with beaded siding. All windows were nine-over-six, double-hung units, and all exterior doors were four paneled beneath a four-light transom. The end-gabled roof is covered with strips of sheet metal. A single internal chimney is located about a third of the way into the roofline. A recessed, full-length, double-story porch runs along the west elevation and provides entry to all rooms. It is supported by seven square posts on each floor, which rest on brick piers. The porch’s first-floor ceiling consists of the unclad joists of the porch floor above.

A new brick patio connects the main level of the house porch with the quarters, and a pyramidal stack of square brick steps set into the corner leads to ground level on the west side. From the south end to the north end on the quarters’ first floor was a door, window, window, window, door, and then a staircase to the second floor. The middle window replaced a door some years ago, and a window at the stair was removed. The narrow staircase at the far north end of the first floor has a dog-leg; the landing is located after the second riser. The staircase terminates at the
northern end of the upper porch with a hinged trap door, which, when closed, covers the staircase opening with a panel matching the porch floor, leaving visible only the porch railing with its narrow square balusters and chamfered posts. The second-floor fenestration pattern alternates doors and windows. The second-floor porch ceiling was lath and plaster.

The north façade is dominated by the recessed two-story porch, which takes up a third of the western end of the façade. The only window on this wall is located just to the west of the façade’s center point but is not original to this wall. A gable-roofed shed against the north façade covers recessed stairs leading to the large basement cellar that extends south to the chimney.

The east façade had six bays on each level with nine-over-six, double-hung windows, except for the northernmost window on the first level, which has been removed. That window might have been installed on the north façade of the quarters.

Slave Quarters, Interiors and Alterations:
Because the interior has been so heavily altered, and then abandoned, over the years by multiple owners, it was in an uninhabitable condition even before the siding, interior doors, transoms, and windows were torn away. However, it is clear the quarters originally had three chambers per floor with the kitchen located in the southernmost lower-level room. The chimney stack, which is presumed to have originally provided ventilation on each side on each floor for a total of four fireplaces, now only vents the two fireplaces upstairs.

The current owner apparently planned to replace rotten wood and renovate the building for a new use. Structural repairs have begun, new windows are stacked on site as is a large pile of new lumber, and it appears that the original exterior doors were to be reused. At the time of the writing of this report in 2018, work had ceased. The Quietdale property is currently vacant and for sale, so a new owner could restore the exterior of the quarters to its original appearance. The fate of this significant dependency remains precarious.

The Grounds:
The most striking change made in 2017 is the construction of tall brick piers along the Quietdale Drive frontage with iron gates across both ends of the horseshoe-shaped drive, while a massive brick structure of unidentified intent sits at midpoint in the row of piers.

A large circular pond with fountain has been constructed in the front yard. The field of vintage spring bulbs on the far east side appears to be undisturbed. The foundation plantings along the front and sides of the house are gone as are the bushes and flowers along the driveway.

History:
The Robinsons in Alabama:
Quietdale is a late antebellum house on the north side of Huntsville in Madison County, Alabama, roughly 20 miles south of the Tennessee border. It was built on 55 acres as the family home for William and Caroline Robinson and their five children. Although the Robinsons owned extensive cotton plantations, the house was on none of them, nor was it in Huntsville; it was neither a plantation nor a townhouse, but a country house.
William Robinson, born 1808 in what is now Russell County, Virginia, to Littleberry and Paulina Robinson, arrived in Madison County with his parents no later than 1818. Historian Thomas Jones Taylor, recounting the early settlement of Madison County, described the influx of settlers along the “great highway from Virginia to Alabama during the years 1818-1819” as being “more like the route of an army of occupation than an ordinary public highway.”

Madison County, then part of the Alabama Territory, is in the Great Bend of the Tennessee River, an area whose fame had long spread eastward through glowing reports of the valley’s fertile soils, abundant forests, and reliable water sources. The future of this new frontier captured the imaginations of small farmers and large planters alike, both eager to make a fresh start on virgin soils and, perhaps, engage in land speculation. Immigrants had begun trickling in to the southern Tennessee Valley as early as 1805 before negotiations for land cessions with the Cherokee and Chickasaw nations were finalized.

By 1809, the government had surveyed sufficient acreage to schedule the first federal sale of Madison County lands in Nashville, Tennessee. Although there were already some 300 squatter families settled in the county, the government auctioned 24,000 acres of the choicest tracts, mostly to wealth planters from Georgia and Virginia, whose ability to purchase large tracts gave them a distinct advantage. Many of these planters were anxious to abandon the marginally profitable tobacco cultivation of the seaboard for the promise of large-scale cotton production, a move made feasible by their possession of considerable wealth and numerous slaves. Indeed, cotton flourished. As roving journalist Anne Royall approached Huntsville in December 1817, she was stunned: “The cotton fields began to appear. These are astonishingly large; from four to five hundred acres in a field!...It has the appearance of magic.”

It was as part of this flood of immigrants that two Robinson brothers and their families arrived shortly before Alabama was admitted to the Union at the end of 1819. Their father, William Robinson, Sr., was born in South Carolina circa 1734, ventured to North Carolina where he married Charity Kennedy, settled in the southwestern tail of Virginia in what is now Russell County long enough to raise a family of eight children, and finally headed to Tennessee where he died in 1802. Along the way he acquired multiple tracts of land, reputedly holding a half interest in some 17,000 acres dispersed across Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. His will named two of his sons, William Jr. and Littleberry, as executors, and it was these two who trekked to Madison County where they and their descendants would leave an enduring imprint.

Col. William Robinson, Jr., born circa 1766, was the first son lured by Alabama Fever to pursue the imagined cotton bonanza in Madison County, arriving by 1816. Having acquired considerable wealth during his four years in Alabama, he died in 1820 leaving his wife Margaret

---


Warden with seven children, “several plantations,” a “mansion house,” hogs, cattle, sheep, horses, his current cotton crop, and several slaves. His 1,000-acre cotton farm in the Little Cove area of southeastern Madison County was divided among his children.\(^6\)

His younger brother, Col. Littleberry Robinson, was the second son who moved to Madison County seeking his fortune. Born circa 1768, Littleberry had married Paulina Burton (who was illiterate and referenced by numerous imaginative spellings) and sired six, possibly seven, children, including William, the dreamer of Quietdale, who would have been about 11 years old when his family arrived. Possibly using his father’s inheritance, Littleberry began purchasing land in 1818, including eight quarter sections and a residence just west of the Meridianville Pike, for which he agreed to pay $21,000.\(^7\) Littleberry’s real estate transactions were convoluted, and it is not certain what he legally held title to at his death in 1822 at age 52. His three youngest children, William, John G., and Martha, were still minors; his two oldest daughters were married; another daughter presumably was deceased; and the youngest boy was either his son or a nephew.

Because Littleberry died intestate, and Paulina, his widow, relinquished her right to administer his estate, William Patton was appointed administrator, secured by a $50,000 obligation put up by himself, Henry Cook, and Rodah Horton, the latter being Littleberry’s son-in-law, real estate partner, and fellow Virginian. The Robinson homeplace on Meridianville Pike was surveyed, and Paulina was allotted the 370 acres surrounding the family dwelling as part of her dower. The settling of estates was frequently a long, drawn-out affair, often taking decades. It was 1834 before Patton demonstrated to the probate judge that the Littleberry estate was insolvent and requested a court order to sell Paulina’s two quarter sections to help discharge the debts. The order was granted and her dower land auctioned, but by then, her son William had come of age. It was he who purchased the family’s homestead at public auction for $700. Two months later, the court declared Littleberry’s estate closed with only $48,947 in assets to be divided among creditors claiming $67,605.\(^8\)

Paulina died in 1835 at 70 years of age, leaving as heirs her children William, John G., James B., Fanny, and Martha. She left no will and no property of consequence except two female slaves and designated William as her executor. He did little settle his mother’s estate, simple though it seemed, and when he died unexpectedly seventeen years later, John Robinson, his cousin, became William’s executor and, by default, Paulina’s. Her estate finally closed in 1853, but not without considerable family squabbling, which was to become something of a Robinson family tradition.\(^9\)

William’s early life is not well documented, but it is obvious that he inherited his family’s talent for acquiring acreage, incurring litigation, and neglecting to pay bills. Judge Taylor recounts that

---

\(^6\) Probate Case No. 639. All cited deeds, court cases, probate, will, and marriage records, are held by Madison County, Alabama.

\(^7\) Deed Book E, 365-366.

\(^8\) Deed Book P, 377-378; Probate Case No. 489.

\(^9\) Probate Case No. 505.
he “commenced his successful career selling good [sic] and groceries.”10 In 1839, he married Caroline Penelope Moore, born 1825 in northern Madison County. They rented a house in Huntsville at the southeast corner of Gates and Henry streets (Henry is now Fountain Circle) as well as a second lot across Gates Street where they housed four cows, three wagons, a buggy and a carriage, three bay horses, five mules, slave quarters, and other dependencies. They were the parents of five surviving children: William Jr., Mary, James P., Charles, and Fannie. During this period, William became a successful cotton planter, acquiring a plantation of some 3,100 acres in the Little Cove area of Madison County and an additional 1,600 acres on his Mississippi plantation in Noxubee County. William, known locally as Black Bill, was elected Madison County sheriff for a three-year term in 1840, it then being unlawful to serve a consecutive term.11

The House:
Oral tradition holds that William dreamed about erecting a country house for his family, designed every detail of it, and even amassed enormous stockpiles of materials for its construction. On July 9, 1852, however, while attending a barbeque, he suffered “an apoplectic fit” and died within hours. He was 44 years old. His obituary elaborated that this was the second attack, the first occurring two years prior while at his Mississippi plantation “from the effects of which he never recovered.”12 His widow Caroline, left with at least two large cotton plantations to manage and five minor children, resolved to proceed with the construction of the house, exactly as her husband had planned—so the story goes. It is a romantic tale but possibly slightly embroidered through years of retelling. Digging through historic documents verifies parts of the story but raises questions about others.

Like his father and mother, William died intestate. Inspection of his estate appraisal filed in 1853 reveals the family residence in Huntsville was valued at $4,000, and the lot across the street “on which the Negro house and stables were situated” was $1,500. Curiously, the deed to the residence lot had been conveyed to them only two months prior to William’s untimely death, although it stated that the family had been in possession and occupancy for some years.13 The 1853 appraisal also lists ninety-three slaves and a significant amount of livestock (presumably housed at the Little Cove plantation), household goods, and 55 acres on the Turnpike Road (the land on which Quietdale would be built). Curiously, the Robinsons did not have the deed for the 55-acre lot until 1856, sometime after the house had been completed. The most intriguing appraisal item is for “1 lot lumber for building and raw brick” valued at $1,500, lending credence to the claim that William had already begun collecting materials for his house.14

Caroline Robinson, determined to proceed with the house construction, retained Samuel Allison as the contractor/builder. The family had relied upon Allison since 1842 to procure their annual supply of bulk goods, such as 750 pounds of pork, ten loads of firewood, and hundreds of pounds

---

10 Taylor, *History of Madison County*, 89.
12 *Southern Advocate* [Huntsville, AL], July 14, 1852, 3.
13 This was the same property on which James G. Birney resided from 1827 to 1829 before departing Huntsville in the 1830s to fight for abolition and twice run for U.S. president on the Liberty Party ticket.
14 Probate Record 16, 341-348; Deed Books K, 502, and M, 532.
of flour. Allison was another Virginian who had migrated to Alabama, although it is unclear whether the Robinson family and Allison were connected while in Virginia. In 1841, Allison wed William’s younger sister Martha, making him part of the Robinson family. The 1850 federal census identifies Allison as a carpenter; ten years later, his profession was “lumber merchant” and he claimed $3,500 in real estate and $5,000 in personal property. In Allison’s 1851 account with William Robinson, his charges began to include building supplies such as quantities of lumber of various sizes and types, hinting that some work may have begun at Quietdale. Presumably, this was the lumber and brick listed in the 1853 appraisal.15

Allison’s accounts provide partial documentation as to the materials and hardware employed in the construction of the house and its approximate date of completion, although the bills that have survived are often difficult to decipher, confusing, and some are undated. A one-page summary of Allison’s work for the Robinsons dated January 1, 1856, includes “Bill for main Building—$5,655.26,” dated July 1, 1853. It is followed by several additional expenses, bringing the total price to $6,169.34, but when interest for two years and six months to January 1, 1856, is added, the total bill for “Building and finishing” amounted to $8,359.42, from which 10 percent was deducted. A separate entry for “Superintending Brick and lumber Kiln” was $25, verifying that at least some of the lumber and brick was secured or processed on site. If these numbers and dates are accurate, Quietdale was essentially completed by the summer of 1853 when the last entry noted “Putting in 510 Lights Glass.”16

A second document that validates the dates on the construction bills is an 1855 affidavit in which Joseph Bradley and William Acklen swore that in their lifetimes, they had heard William Robinson state “he had employed Samuel Allison to do the building, now occupied by his Family near Huntsville, and that the said building was being erected at the time of the death of said William Robinson.” This statement, combined with Allison’s bills to the estate, verifies that William had begun construction prior to his death, probably in 1851, and that the house was occupied by the family no later than 1855. Until more definitive documentation appears, it seems reasonable to date the dwelling to the 1851-1853 period and to accept that William did indeed begin its construction, and Caroline was responsible for overseeing its completion.17

Part of the lore surrounding the history of Quietdale is that the actual work was executed by William’s slaves, many of whom presumably were trained in the building arts, but there is scant reason that a cotton planter would have invested in such specialized, expensive workers. In fact, a comparison of William’s 1853 estate appraisal with that of local builder George Steele from 1856 reveals that none of William’s slaves were listed as skilled artisans while thirteen of Steele’s were trained mechanics, each of greater value than any of William’s.18 It is clear Allison was charged with the construction, but there is no information about whether he maintained his own crew of skilled slaves or, if not, whom he employed. An unrelated local contract from 1810 to erect a log house sheds light on how such projects could be accomplished: the contractor agreed to finish the structure according to the specifications in the contract “in a plain neat and

15 Probate Case No. 505.
16 Probate Case No. 505.
17 Probate Case No. 505.
18 Probate Record 16, 342-344; Chancery Record AA, 481-482.
workmanship manner” and the owner “is to find my hands and do the hauling part….”19 The latter clause suggests that the local tradition could have been for Allison to use some of Robinson’s slaves, but it might have required Robinson or Allison to provide others possessing specific construction skills. It was common practice at the time for builders to hire slaves skilled in carpentry, masonry, plastering, or blacksmithing, frequently for a year, rather than to own them. Interestingly, one account of materials used in Quietdale included such items as two dormer windows for $20; 102' of architrave for $6.12; 114 shelves for $17.10; 579' of moulded base for 20 cents/foot; 265' plane base for 6 cents/foot; 62' of pilasters for $21.70; 121' of transom rails for $24.20; sixteen cedar caps and lintels to grates (foundation vents) for $9.60; 7560' of weatherboarding for $170.10; fifty steps in stairs for $150; and so forth.20 What is not clear is whether Allison purchased these items or oversaw their production, and who the actual workers were that built Quietdale also remains an open question.

Additional pages of accounts for construction completed by Allison for the Robinsons are undated but include work completed between 1842 and 1852. These are for farm structures that were erected on the Little Cove plantation. Combining the material and labor costs reveals that a mill house with water wheel cost $380 while the wheel, measuring 12' x 8', was an additional $48—undoubtedly it was located on Robinson Mill Creek, which meandered across William’s Little Cove property. For a dwelling, Allison charged $1,313; the granary was $314; a corn crib $136; the gin house ran to $275 without machinery; a barn and shed cost $594; and the mule stable was only $56. For the Little Cove plantation structures, the total bill was roughly $3,000. In a separate account between the years 1842 and early 1851, Allison performed work on the stables, crib, cow house, kitchen, and smoke house “in town,” which would have been on the lots in Huntsville.21

Several issues remain unresolved. If construction of Quietdale began in 1851 or even early 1852, one might expect the 1853 appraisal of William’s estate to not the presence of some “improvement” on the 55-acre tract on the Meridianville Road. More curious still is the disposition of the town property where the family resided for multiple years. Following William’s death in 1852, the probate court overseeing his estate ordered that the two Huntsville lots be sold by John and James B. Robinson, his administrators. At a public auction in January 1853, John C. Spottswood purchased the lots for $4,000 payable in one and two years without interest.22 If the Robinsons had continued to occupy this property until Quietdale was completed and Spottswood had paid in full, then he should have taken possession of the two Huntsville lots no later than 1855, but, in fact, the administrators did not convey the title to Spottswood until August 1858. Did Spottswood not complete payment until then? Did the Robinsons continue to occupy the house in town? The latter explanation is less likely, but it is impossible to know.

Immediately behind Quietdale, but detached and situated perpendicular to it, stands a structure at least as significant (if not more so) as the big house, partially by virtue of its size, but more

20 Probate Case No. 505.
21 Probate Case No. 505.
22 Deed Book CC, lots 49 and 57.
importantly by its very existence. It was constructed as a frame, two-story kitchen and slave quarters containing six large rooms, three per floor, each accessed from a double-tiered porch along the west side. Each chamber had a door with transom and large window opening onto the porch and two more windows on the east wall. The gable roof extended over the porch and was supported on seven columns on each level. An exterior stair within the porch provided upstairs access. The first-floor room nearest the house would have been the kitchen given its proximity to the house’s rear entry and retains a massive, interior brick chimney that was used for cooking and heating. The siting of this structure is such that when viewed from the southeast, it almost appears to be a continuation of the east wall of the main house, which raises the question whether the exceptionally large and numerous windows of this dependency were intended for the exterior effect or to create more commodious quarters for the occupants. The design of this structure is not unique; there were others of similar arrangement, such as the smaller one at Rosemount plantation in Greene County, Alabama [see HABS No. AL-212], which burned. Amazingly, this one has survived and stands today as a unique relic. While previous owners have made unfortunate alterations, primarily inside, the quarters now face a grave danger from an inappropriate renovation that could result in total destruction.

There has been speculation that the quarters may have been constructed earlier than Quietdale and survived as a dependency from an earlier homestead or were even intended as a primary residence while the big house was under construction. Several local examples of the latter practice have been identified. However, surviving documents reveal that the kitchen also was erected by Samuel Allison, apparently just prior to beginning construction of the main house. Allison’s 1856 summary statement mentioned above lists the kitchen structure as completed in 1852 at a cost of $735 to which had been added $220 interest for the three years and nine months the bill had remained unpaid. (It should be noted that arriving at an exact price for Quietdale’s various structures is complicated by the addition of interest payments and the reductions of anywhere from 10 to 25 percent at various times.)

A receipt exists that implies the administrators for William’s estate paid the full bill of $7,638 for the house and kitchen quarters in April 1856, but that was not the end of Allison’s troubles. Despite the fact Allison had married into the Robinson family, he faced as much difficulty collecting debts from them as did others. In 1856, just months after receiving payment for the house and quarters, Allison brought suit against the Robinson administrators John and James B. claiming he was due $4,000 for work and labor performed by him for William in his lifetime and at his request for the years 1842 to 1852; he further claimed $3,000 for cash paid out by Allison in addition to work and labor performed for William. The administrators responded that those debts had been paid before the suit was filed, the demands were barred by the statute of limitations, and the bills were not filed in probate within the required eighteen-month period following the appointment of administrators. John and James B. then countered that Allison was actually indebted to the estate for some $30,000 for funds and work provided by William to Allison. As late as 1858 the suit was still pending in circuit court when a jury hearing the case found for Allison, although it assessed the damages at $2,298 plus interest and other charges, which brought the total to $3,079. Unfortunately, the minutes of this case are missing so it is unclear exactly what was being argued. However, one exhibit lists the structures Allison built for William on his Little Cove plantation with the prices; Allison further alleged that he should be
paid for going to Tennessee for lumber and for cash he paid at Whitesburg for cedar. He further related that he made a set of brick molds and installed fencing. The missing details could have provided invaluable documentation of antebellum construction practices. The case was appealed to the Alabama Supreme Court, but apparently it was not heard and closed August 1860.  

Based on these documents, it can be concluded that the kitchen was constructed in 1851-1852, and the house was essentially completed by 1853. The ruby glass transom at the front entry is etched with “Quietdale 1854” but probably is not original since “Quietdale” has not appeared in any historic papers.

A second appraisal of the personal property of the William Robinson estate recorded in 1859 runs to six pages and identifies 102 slaves, livestock, bulk food stuffs, crops, and farm equipment in Madison County as well as the furnishings in Quietdale. The 1860 federal census of the following year for Caroline, then 37, reported her real estate holdings valued at $135,000 and personal property of $250,000. The coming war would decimate her assets; however, the Quietdale property escaped damage during the war, prompting Caroline to insure the house to protect her surviving investment. An Aetna policy dated 1866 insured the “two story frame Dwelling covered with Metal on part and part with Shingles Seven Thousand Five Hundred Dollars. On the Furniture contained therein Two Thousand Dollars. On her two story Frame Kitchen and servants dorm covered with shingles Five Hundred Dollars” for a total of $10,000. The policy continued to describe the property as situated on the east side of the Meridian Road, 1.5 miles north of the city of Huntsville, owned and occupied by Mrs. C. P. Robinson as a family residence. This insurance coverage is reasonably close to the construction costs submitted by Allison, verifying the then-value of a significant mid-nineteenth century country house. The 1871 tax assessment for Quietdale, which lumped the land and improvements in one figure, was $13,000.  

Further Questions:
These documents confirm that Samuel Allison was the contractor/builder of Quietdale and that it was essentially completed by 1853. They further demonstrate that construction began before William’s demise, but they are silent as to whom credit should be assigned for the design.

Locally, William is believed to be the designer—it was his dream. But the scale and quality of the design as well as certain specific features suggest an architect was involved, perhaps as an advisor if only to refine or clarify the homeowner’s vision. The house is a frame, two-story, five-bay Greek Revival house, except for the almost identical, picturesque front and side porches, each one-story supported by six bracketed, octagonal columns from which flat Tudoresque arches spring. This minor break with the Greek Revival continues with the double-leaf front doors set between a pair of sturdy, incised angular pilasters supporting the arched and jigsaw ornamented entry. These porches and entry appear to be an early instance in Madison County of the coming shift from neoclassical precedents to the romantic eclecticism that blossomed after the Civil War. There are some who have argued with vigor that these porches could be not be

23 Probate Case No. 505; Case No. 4640, Circuit Court Record, 483-496.
24 Probate Record 23, 435-440; Tax Book 1871 Beat 1, 40; copy of Aetna policy from 1886 in author’s personal collection.
original to the house, that they had to date from the 1870s, and that they replaced the originals, whatever they might have been, because the romantic styles had not yet arrived in Huntsville.

One intriguing bit of evidence to the contrary is an 1859 bill from the Huntsville craftsman Thomas Gassaway to Caroline for “painting verandas.” The concept of “veranda” had floated over from England, and the term came into usage during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. This bill proves that verandas were not unknown in Madison County in the 1850s and represented a distinct departure from Greek-inspired porticoes, which they soon replaced.

Furthermore, during the antebellum period, Huntsville was home to a talented architect/builder by the name of George Steele who designed the majority of the town’s public structures and many of its dwellings. Although not academically trained, he was exceptionally well self-educated and designed competently in Federal, Greek Revival, and Gothic, often introducing the newest styles to town. Steele would have been cognizant of the nascent architectural styles and could have proposed these veranda designs. Undoubtedly, he was familiar with the books of Alexander Jackson Davis, Andrew Jackson Downing, and others who were promoting the Picturesque cottage for rural dwelling as early as the 1840s by introducing Gothic and Italianate designs that were widely disseminated before the 1850s, at least to those who were attentive. As early as 1841, Downing derided the “pseudo-Greek Temple” form, then most popular for American country villas, and encouraged the adoption of a style that by “its varied and picturesque form and outline, its porches, verandas, etc., also appears to have some reasonable connection, or be in perfect keeping, with surrounding nature.” So the bill for painting Quietdale’s verandas demonstrates that the concept of a shady, fanciful porch was already finding favor over the formal portico. Additionally, multiple examples exist of southeastern dwellings dating from the 1850s that experimented with grafting a few Gothic or Italianate details onto the symmetrical antebellum box. One notable example is the North Carolina builder Jacob Holt who decorated his otherwise rigidly Greek Revival houses with playful elements to create a new eclectic style.

It has been further argued that the Quietdale verandas could not be original because the clapboard is painted behind the pilasters and a painted foundation vent exists beneath the side veranda. If these porches were original, the argument runs, there would have been no paint in these locations. However, it was already understood that when constructing with wood, it was prudent to paint all the surfaces if one could afford it, even those not visible, as protection against the weather. In fact, on December 1, 1848, the local Southern Advocate newspaper published a short, unsigned piece entitled “Facts in Building” that clearly advised the use of paint as the “best economy, in the preservation it affords to all wood work.” The argument that the porches are Victorian replacements is countered by the evidence that they could just as easily have been one of the first to appear in Huntsville.

---

25 Frances Roberts Collection series 1, sub-series B, in Box 3, Folder 3 (3362), University of Alabama-Huntsville Archives, Louis Salmon Library.
Another feature of interest is the original floor plan. Quietdale was constructed with a distinctive arrangement where the stair hall consisted of two enclosed rooms behind the entry foyer, each having a parallel set of steps to the second floor, separated by a wall extending from the first floor through the second and thereby dividing the house into two parts. The two rooms were inaccessible one from the other on the second level. As might be expected, this arrangement did not survive the occupancy of the second owner. At an unknown date, the dividing wall was dismantled and half of each flight was removed while the remaining halves were connected by a landing extending across the rear of the now-enlarged room. Odd as the original layout seems today, there existed sufficient examples of similar arrangements in Madison County to suggest that it was not exceptional at that time; both the Laughinghouse-Sisco and Grayson house had separate stairs to a divided upper floor—even Oak Place [see HABS AL-402, listed in the National Register in 1974], the house George Steele designed for himself, featured separate stairways and a split upper story—although the more common plan was for the central hall to have one stair at the front and a second ascend from the rear. At least two explanations have been proposed for this split arrangement: one, it permitted separation of the sexes, especially during parties, and two, one side accommodated formal affairs and guests while the other was designed for the family’s private use. The second rationale appears to be the case here as it is obvious that the east side, divided into two large connected rooms on each level, is distinctly more ornate and intended to impress while the west side is divided into rooms of varying size and shape according to their intended use. The west half represents a significant advance over the traditional double-pile layout and was an early step towards breaking through the staid exterior elevations to create an asymmetrical, irregular façade reflective of the interior arrangement.

One other layout distinction is the side-hall-and-entry to the west veranda running off the center hall or passage. While this arrangement also is not unique in the area, it is infrequent and primarily survives in those houses constructed by the Virginia contingent, specifically Oak Place, Greenlawn, and Quietdale. Finally, one other uncommon feature is the exterior handling of the chimneys, which are not flush but protrude a few inches beyond the exterior walls. This treatment appeared on Greenlawn, and the rear chimneys of the Rodah Horton house [see HABS AL-410, demolished 1949], as well as at Quietdale.

When one considers Quietdale’s verandas, double stairways with split second story, and side-hall-and-porch layout, it is noticeable that two of these features earlier appeared in George Steele’s own house called Oak Place. This is not to argue that Steele was responsible for designing Quietdale, but to suggest he was more qualified to propose new ideas that might have appealed to William’s sense of self as a style-setter. At the least, it is tempting to credit Steele with influencing some of these choices, if perhaps not with designing the full structure; but no concrete evidence has been located. Steele died in 1855 (three years after William) although he could have influenced certain decisions while both were living. Steele’s estate, administered by his son Matthew, also a builder, list two debts for work completed for the William Robinson estate, one specifically for work furnished by Matthew, but the other is unspecified. They are dated 1856, the same year Allison sued for non-payment, and are for “balance of work” done, one for $1,131 and the other for $1,973, substantial amounts indicating that the Steeles had more
input than previously acknowledged, especially when one considers that Steele’s two bills equaled almost half the original amount charged by Allison for the entire house.

The final mystery concerning Quietdale is on what terms the Robinsons acquired the 55 acres on which Quietdale sits. It was not until after William’s death and after completion of the house that the Robinson heirs were forced into Chancery Court to sue for receipt of the deed, awarded in 1855 and filed in probate on January 16, 1856.

The Quietdale property originally possessed the usual complement of antebellum dependencies mentioned previously that have vanished over the years except for the kitchen/slave quarters and two much later dilapidated barns. A large field east of the house yard contains hundreds of vintage bulbs worthy of preservation.

The Virginians and Their Buildings:
Quietdale was located north of Huntsville while William’s Little Cove plantation lay some 10 miles to the southeast. Many of Huntsville’s prosperous citizens, particularly the Georgia faction, who attended the first land sale in 1809 with money and insider tips enabling them to snap up the choicest parcels, chose to erect their homes within a few blocks of Huntsville’s courthouse square while maintaining their plantations at a considerable remove. Some others who arrived slightly later purchased tracts along the Meridianville Pike, the main road north to Tennessee, and these were frequently settlers who had come more directly from Virginia. Whether these families were acquainted in Virginia is not clear, but once here they became closely entangled, if they were not already, through marriages, investments, legalities, and common backgrounds. One especially tightly interrelated group of Virginians consisted of the Oteys, the Hortons, and the Robinsons.

A brief consideration of these families reveals much about early settlement patterns and customs. Walter Otey married Mary Walton in 1800 in Virginia, had several children, immigrated to Madison County circa 1817, and settled in a log cabin on a quarter section near the village of Meridianville where he died in 1823. His son Madison, born 1818, did not leave for his mother’s home until he married Octavia Wyche in 1849 (also of Virginia heritage), which prompted him in 1850 to build Greenlawn (see HABS AL-476, listed in the National Register in 1982) for his new family on the east side of the Meridianville Pike, just south of Meridianville. Madison was the last of his siblings to marry, but three of his sisters already had made advantageous marriages, two of them to Robinsons and the third to Rodah Horton.

John Jacob Robinson, William’s cousin, and James B. Robinson, William’s brother, also established themselves in Madison County, prospered, acquired large tracts of cotton lands, married sisters, and each built a magnificent brick Greek Revival mansion on the west side of the Meridianville Pike. Virginia family history relates that John Robinson (born circa 1802)

28 Chancery Court Book AA, 574, 580.
29 Deed Book AA, 330-331.
30 Dorothy Scott Johnson, Cemeteries of Madison County, Alabama Vol II (Huntsville, AL: Johnson Historical Publications, 1978), 243-244.
31 The relationships of James B. and John to each other and to William are still vigorously debated.
departed Virginia at age 14 for Meridianville, Alabama, to work for Rodah Horton and had amassed sufficient funds by 1820 to marry Caroline Louis Otey, a sister of Rodah Horton’s second wife. This romantic tale could well be true as the Horton and Robinson families apparently were close in Virginia. John and Caroline built Oaklawn [see HABS AL-411, listed in the National Register in 1977] circa 1845. James B. Robinson (born 1810) married Mary Frances Otey in 1831 and their home Forestfield was reputed to be a near copy of Oaklawn; however, it was significantly damaged by Federal troops in November 1864, and a photograph purportedly of it in the 1903 book *Forestfield* by Robert Bentley is believed to be of Oaklawn.

A third significant member in this transplanted Virginia clan was Rodah Horton (born 1794) who married Christiana Robinson in 1818 in Madison County. She was born in Russell County, Virginia, in 1800 as the second daughter of Littleberry Robinson, thereby making Rodah a son-in-law of Littleberry Robinson, with whom he partnered in various real estate transactions, and a brother-in-law of William Robinson. Littleberry and Christiana both died in 1822. Two years later, Rodah married Lucy Ann Otey, a sister of the Robinson’s wives, with whom he had six surviving children. His marriages and legal affairs intertwined him with the expanding Otey family as well as with the Robinson clan. In the early 1840s Rodah constructed his Greek Revival house [see HABS AL-410, demolished 1949] on the west side of the Meridianville Pike abutting the Oaklawn acreage. He served two terms, 1836-1838, as a Madison County representative in the state legislature, farmed multiple plantations in Madison and Marengo counties in Alabama and one in Mississippi, and was intimate with and a financial partner of various Robinsons. He died intestate in 1846 at age 52 and was interred in Huntsville’s Maple Hill Cemetery. (Much like William Robinson who died while his dream home was under construction, Rodah died shortly after his was completed.) Rodah Horton is the grandfather of Judge James E. Horton, Jr., who issued a decisive 1933 ruling for justice in a Scottsboro Boys’ trial, thereby forfeiting another judicial term as well as his friends and standing in Athens, Alabama, where he had grown up. (Not until October 2017 was a statue honoring Judge Horton erected in front of the Limestone County courthouse in Athens.)

And finally, while not living directly on the Pike, architect George Steele, also a migrant from western Virginia, lived nearby and is known to have been closely connected with this interrelated family. He constructed the massive columns that fronted Horton’s house, reputedly as the result of losing a political bet with Horton, although his $800 bill for the job was marked paid, putting the lie to that tale.32 Steele is further suspected of having more than a neighborly connection with the designs of Quietdale and Greenlawn. Architect George Steele left a lasting imprint on Huntsville. He designed the second Madison County courthouse [see HABS AL-437, demolished 1910], the Huntsville Branch of the Second Bank [see HABS AL-405, listed in the National Register in 1974], and his last home, Oak Place [see HABS AL-402, listed in the National Register in 1974], as well as the Roach-Cabaniss house [see HABS AL-431], the Steward’s house [see HABS AL-408], the portico on the LeRoy Pope house [see HABS AL-406], and the renovation and additions to the Fearn-Garth house [see HABS AL-414], the latter four in the Twickenham Historic District [listed in the National Register in 1973]. All are extant

32 Probate Case No. 1325, Folder 5.
except the courthouse. He also designed at least fifteen additional houses, two churches, several schools, and one signed mausoleum.\textsuperscript{33}

One more curious distinction of this extended Virginia clan should be noted. Of the twenty Madison County houses documented by HABS in the 1930s, only three were of frame construction, all the others being brick, a percentage that likely is representative of the overall construction tradition for antebellum homes of the wealthy in the country. Of the three frame structures, one was built by Walter Otey, one by Rodah Horton, and the third was purchased by William’s daughter, Mary Robinson Burritt [see HABS AL-474]. Quietdale, also of frame construction, while not included in the original HABS survey, belongs in this group. Is there a reason this clique of Virginians chose frame rather than brick homes? And why were these all located along the stretch of Meridianville Pike north of town unless they were connected by their Virginia backgrounds and their inter-marriages? The Quietdale, Horton and Oaklawn properties encompassed most of the east half of Section 24, Township 3, Range 1 West, making the families close neighbors as well as relatives. This collection of antebellum homes, with all its mysteries intact, survives as a significant and impressive relic of early life in Madison County as fashioned by one subset of immigrants. The Horton house was demolished in 1949 for a subdivision, but Greenlawn, Oak Place, Oaklawn, and Quietdale are extant, leaving a lasting heritage that enriches us today.

**William and Caroline’s Descendants:**
Caroline Robinson lived out her life at Quietdale rearing her five living children, all of whom were minors under the age of 14 when their father died. By the 1870 census, Caroline’s assets had shrunk dramatically as the result of the war and emancipation, but she carried on until 1885 when she died at age 60, having heroically retained possession of the family lands. By order of the Madison County Probate Court, Quietdale was auctioned and sold out of the family in 1886.\textsuperscript{34} Caroline and William are interred together in Huntsville’s Maple Hill Cemetery along with sons William and James P., neither of whom married, and daughter Fanny alongside her husband, James Ridley. Granddaughter Carrie Ridley Herreshoff has a stone in the family plot, and two Robinson daughters, Mary and Carry who died as infants, also are buried there. The third son, Charles, married and left the county. Mary, the other Robinson daughter, is buried in Maple Hill Cemetery in the Burritt mausoleum with her in-laws.

Daughter Fanny and her husband, Dr. James Ridley, resided in Huntsville where he conducted his medical practice, and they became parents of three daughters: Marveleen, Irma Grey, and Carrie. Around 1946, Marveleen Walker and Irma Grey Herreshoff, both then residing in Atlanta, donated $50,000 to Huntsville’s Episcopal Church of the Nativity for the construction of a new parish house on the condition that it be named Ridley Hall in honor of their father, who had died in 1896.\textsuperscript{35} The hall was dedicated in 1953 and stands today as a significant component of the Episcopal Church complex that was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in

\textsuperscript{33} These have not been documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey.
\textsuperscript{34} Deed Book MMM, 265-267.
\textsuperscript{35} Frances C. Roberts, Sesquicentennial History of Church of the Nativity, Episcopal 1843-1993 (Huntsville, AL: Church of the Nativity, 1992), 75, 109-110, and 136.
1973. In 1990, the Frank Wills-designed Episcopal sanctuary was declared a National Historic Landmark, although Ridley Hall was deemed noncontributing.

The other Robinson daughter, Mary King, married Dr. Amatus Robbins Burritt, a homeopathic doctor who had settled in Huntsville in the mid-1850s where he established his practice. Two years after their 1866 marriage, Mary purchased a Federal-period frame house [see HABS AL-474, demolished 1949] where they raised their two children, Carrie and William Henry Burritt. Amatus died in 1876. William Henry followed his father into homeopathic medicine studying in Nashville, New York, and Cincinnati. He returned to Huntsville in 1891 when his mother Mary became ill, was declared non-compos mentis, and committed to the state asylum—as were her brother William and grandson Burritt Matthews—where she died in 1920. William Henry lived in Missouri for several years, actively involved in the rubber industry, before returning to Huntsville in the early 1930s. In 1949, he deeded his childhood home jointly to the city of Huntsville and Madison County for construction of a new county health department dedicated to the memory of his father, Amatus Burritt. By then, William Henry had completed construction of his retirement home, situated on a prominent brow overlooking Huntsville. The house is a truly unique design—insulated with straw bales—while incorporating a federal mantel and stair rail from the family home. His will deeded this house, its 160 acres, and its furnishings to Huntsville in 1955 for a city museum and park, now known as Burritt on the Mountain [listed in the National Register in 1992]. Although married three times, Burritt died in 1955 leaving no direct heirs.

One final structure with a loose connection to Quietdale is Huntsville’s third high school. In 1947, Johnnie and Guy Bishop became the owners of Quietdale, and in 1955, they sold 24.6 acres on the south side of Quietdale Drive to the Huntsville Board of Education for construction of a new school that opened in 1958, initially as a junior high school. (These 24 acres were not part of the original Robinson tract.) After fifty-six years of service, Lee High School was replaced in 2012 by a new, enlarged Lee High adjacent to it on the west side. The 1958 school buildings will be demolished.

Owners and Name:
Quietdale has passed through multiple owners and is now situated on just 6.2 acres. The second owner was Alexander Erskine Mastin who purchased the 58-acre property at public auction for $3,500 in 1886. It remained in the Mastin family for sixty-one years being willed first to Mastin’s wife Lula on Erskin’s death in 1920 and then to her five daughters at her death in 1931. In 1942, four of the daughters deeded their interests to the fifth, Sallie M. Gill, who retained the remaining 26 acres until 1947 when she and her husband, Eugene Gill, sold the property to Johnnie Bishop. Guy and Johnnie Bishop lived there until 1982 when they sold it to Niles Prestage who resold it three years later to Ira and Billie Jones. The Joneses were devoted to the preservation of the house and were the owners who requested that it be documented for HABS. Sadly, Ira died shortly after that discussion, and Billie sold the house in 2016 to the current

---

36 Deed Book BBB, 523; Probate Case No. 4097; Deed Book 201, 101.
37 Will Book 7, 205.
38 Deed Book 227, 218.
39 Deed Book MMM, 265; Will Book 4, 377; Will Book 5, 165; Deed Book 160, 151; Deed Book 183, 3.
owner, Anna Thornley, who has undertaken a major, but incomplete, renovation and now has it on the market.40

When the name Quietdale became attached to the Robinson property has not been identified. The records in William’s estate files reference the “William Robinson homeplace.” An 1884 plat surveyed for Reuben Chapman, who owned much of the surrounding acreage, included Quietdale but identified it as “Robinson” and the road running in front of it, east from the Meridianville Pike, is labeled “Road to the Pike owned by Chapman.” The 1931 city directory lists Eugene Gill’s residence as “Quietdale” with no street name. This is the earliest reference to the name so far discovered. An article written by Pat Jones for the Huntsville Times in the 1930s refers to the property as “the estate now known” as Quietdale, which suggests the Gills might have originated the name.41 In 1943, the city directory listed the Gills address as Meridian Pike, the shortened name of Meridianville Pike, implying that the street in front of Quietdale was still private. In fact, a 1959 map names the front lane “Quietdale Drive (private)” while the 1959 directory lists the house at 401 Quietdale. Although the house is well within Huntsville today, it remained in the county for 100 years, not being annexed into the corporate limits until 1955, the year the city school board purchased land for a new high school on the south side of Quietdale Drive.

Sources:
It is entirely possible that more historical documents will be uncovered that shed additional light on the history of Quietdale and the Robinsons. William’s early death left his family affairs in chaos for decades, and his estate was not settled until 1893, requiring every scrap of paper documenting an obligation be preserved somewhere. Parts of William and Caroline’s papers are in three sites in Huntsville: the Madison County Record Center at the Huntsville Public Library; the Madison County Record Room, third floor of the Madison County Courthouse; and the France Roberts Collection, University of Alabama-Huntsville Archives, Louis Salmon Library. Additional collections might be housed in the University of Alabama archives in Tuscaloosa, and the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery.

Cited deeds, court case, probate, will, and marriage records are all from Madison County, Alabama, unless otherwise identified.


40 Deed Book 661, 43 and 53; Deed No. 2017-11570.
41 Jones, True Tales of Old Madison County, 80.


**Historian:** Linda Bayer Allen, Huntsville, Alabama, 2018

**Project Information:** Linda Bayer Allen prepared the historical report, with Caroline Swope contributing to the architectural description section. Ralph Allen completed the measured drawings. The Allens donated the documentation to the Historic American Buildings Survey in 2018. Heritage Documentation Programs’ staff photographer Renee Bieretz produced the large-format photography in 2012.
Appendix: Original and Subsequent Owners

Quietdale, 401 Quietdale Drive – SE c 24-3-1W, 6.2 acres

1855  Deed of 9 June 1855, recorded in v. AA, p. 330-331
From: Augustus H. Ford et al
To: Caroline P. Robinson, William B. Robinson et al & James B. Robinson
For: Decree out of 29th Chancery District, June Term 1855
Delivered to and registered in Probate 16 January 1856

1886  Deed of 8 December 1886, record in v. MMM, p. 265
From: John W. Grayson, administrator of Caroline P. Robinson
To: Alexander E. Mastin
For: $3500 at auction for several tracts: 50 ac + 4 ac + 4 ac
“known as the William Robinson homeplace” and located in 24-3-1W,
beginning at the southeast corner of section
Will: “I give, devise, and bequeath to my lovely wife, Lula S. Mastin, all my
property…” Died in 1920 (W.B. 4, p. 377)
Will: “I give to my five daughters, Mary Irby Mastin, Sallie Mastin Gill,
Henrietta Spragins Mastin, Laura Mastin Wright, and Lula Mastin Harlan,
my home place on which I now reside of about 57 acres on the Meridian
Pike….” Lula S. Mastin died in 1931 (W.B. 5, p. 165)

1942  Deed of 16 March 1942, recorded in v. 160, p. 151
From: Mary Irby Mastin, Henrietta M. & William H. Rees, Lula M. & Jay
Harlan, Laura M. Wright
To: Sallie M. Gill
For: Their four-fifths interest, 26.29 acres
1947  Deed of 2 December 1947, recorded in v. 183, p. 3
From: Sallie Mastin Gill
To: Johnnie H. Bishop
For: Unavailable, 34.96 acres

1982  Deed of 31 March 1982, recorded in v. 600, p. 332
From: Guy S. and Johnnie Mae Bishop
To: Niles and Judith Prestage
For: Unavailable, 6.12 acres + 10.3 acres

1985  Deed of 1 October 1985, recorded in v. 661, p. 43 and 53
From: Niles and Judith Prestage
To: Ira P. and Billie L. Jones
For: Unavailable, 2.66 acres + 3.55 acres

2016  Deed of 28 December 2016, instrument #2017-11570
From: Billie L. Jones, surviving spouse of Ira P. Jones
To: Anna Thornley
For: $450,000, 2.66 acres + 3.55 acres

2017  Quit Claim Deed of 13 April 1907, instrument #2017-203780
From: Anna Thornley
To: Quietdale 1854, Inc., an Alabama Corporation
For: $216,000 (Assessor’s Market Value on 13 April 2017)