

The King House 1823 – 2023 *at 200*

King House, erected in 1823, originally was the plantation home of Edmund King, a Virginian who came to Alabama by way of Georgia about 1817. Built of brick made from local clay and erected by Mr. King's own men, it was the most elegant home in Central Alabama and the first house in the area to have imported glass windows.

After Mr. King died (1863) and his children had scattered, the property passed into other hands. In 1908, the Alabama Girls Technical Institute (the forerunner of the University of Montevallo) purchased the house and 43.40 acres of land from Mrs. Frank Nabors for \$8,502.

The house has been called by various names: "The Mansion," "Kingswood," "Nabors Hall," and "King House." It has been a classroom building and office building, the infirmary, home economics "practice home," a summer home for men students, and just before renovation, the home of Financial Aid to Students.

Mrs. Golda Johnson, wife of former UM President Kermit Johnson, is chiefly responsible for the restoration to its present beauty. With the eventual backing of the Board of Trustees and a \$40,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the exterior was restored to its original appearance and the interior was renovated, using the

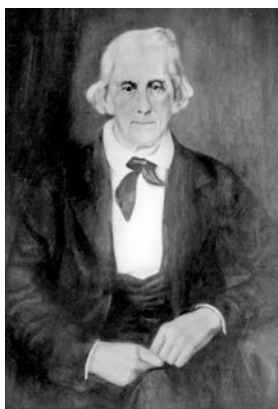


Alabama Girls Technical Institute students gather on the front porch of King House in 1908, the year the school purchased the house and 43 acres of surrounding land from the Nabors family.

same staircase, much of the original flooring and hardware, and some window glass. The architect for the renovation was Gene Jones of Evan Terry, Architects. Nicholas Holmes of Mobile was consultant and Lewis Mayson, supervisor of the actual work. Mr. Mayson says it is the best example of Federal Architecture in its part of Alabama.

Edmund King (1782-1863) was a Virginian who, after a sojourn in Georgia, came to Alabama in 1817. He was attracted to the area around Wilson's Hill (the first name for Montevallo) by the good soil, plentiful timber, ample water supply from several good springs, proximity to two navigable rivers (Coosa and Cahaba) and the beauty of its hills. In moving his family to their new home, he had the guidance and protection of William Weatherford (Red Eagle), an Indian chief who escorted the caravan through the Creek Nation but who refused to go further. No one seems to know how or when he and King became friends.

Mr. King acquired large tracts of land and became a successful planter. In addition, he was a merchant and a promoter of the railroad that came from Selma to Montevallo in 1853.



He became interested in iron manufacturing and after buying the furnace that Horace Ware had developed, he made hollowware which he sold to neighbors and to folks down the Coosa River. He was the leading citizen of the community and his home the social center.

Education was one of his chief concerns. He gave generously to Howard College (Samford University) and did what he could to build up the library there. Often he offered challenge gifts, hoping others would match them. The lot on which Reynolds Hall now stands he gave for the site of "The Academy" in 1851.

He was a devout Baptist. In addition to supporting Howard College, a Baptist institution, and his own local church, he frequently wrote articles for The Alabama Baptist on issues which he promoted or denounced.



The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) sent a photographer to Montevallo to evaluate and make photographs of the 111 year old building as it looked in 1934. The photo clearly shows how the stucco, applied following construction to protect the original brick from deterioration, was scored to create the illusion that the house had a veneer of large blocks of stone.

That he died on June 28, 1863 is an established fact, but the cause of his death is in dispute. The Southwest Baptist in a lengthy obituary says that after two years of declining health, he died of digestive troubles. Another account credits a falling limb from a tree in his orchard for killing him instantly! However he died, he is buried in the King family cemetery only a few yards from where he lived.



(Left) A mantelpiece in King House documented by the HABS photography in 1934. (Above) This HABS photo shows a rear view of the King House and how at some point in its life the original detached kitchen building had been taken down and replaced by attached kitchen and porch additions.

Footsteps and time bore heavily upon the old mansion house and the toll became progressively worse. As enrollment at the college increased, more classroom space was needed and partitions had been added to meet this need. Blackboards and other equipment had been installed. In addition to classrooms, the old building served at different times as an infirmary and home management house for the Home Economics Department. The old plastered walls had been patched and repatched. Fireplaces had been closed and other changes made. Hundreds of students passed through the building unaware of the illustrious family who once resided there. The joys of birth and sadness of death which had occurred within these walls were known by few who sat in these classrooms and yet, it is likely that many sensed a dignity and character reminiscent of the era in which it had its beginning.

There had been some discussion in the past as to the old building's future – if indeed it should have one at all. Its life had been extended once, if not more times, and in 1932 the Alabama Writer's Conclave held a ceremony on campus and placed a handsome bronze tablet on the old house which points out its uniqueness as an historical landmark. This tablet was presented by the descendants of the King family and was unveiled by two young ladies, Helen Rosa Coleman (Mrs. Jack Monaghan of Birmingham) and Frank Ragan King (Mrs. Burton Curry of Tuscaloosa).

As new buildings were erected on campus, classes were moved from the old house and eventually the only service left was the financial aid office for student services.

Came the tenure of the tenth president of this University. It was soon evident that a decision had to be made concerning the old homestead. Tear it down or let it die a slow death – or patch it again for some unknown, as yet, need?

The writer, being interested in history, began asking questions, getting answers, and delving into records which led to an intense desire to restore the old homestead so that it could retain its rightful place in history. Desire alone, of course, was not enough. Financial aid was to be the big



UM president Kermit Johnson and his wife Golda look over plans for the authentic restoration of the 1823 King House in 1973.

problem. The idea was tossed out and some interest was shown but it was somewhat casual and little action resulted.

More and more people liked the idea but volunteers to help were practically nil. An ally was found in the president's secretary, Joan Gordon, and with two women prodding, the project was put on the agenda of the board meeting.

Understandably the board had to justify the use before appropriating money for a project of that magnitude but a farsighted and creative-minded board did agree to provide funds, to at least get the project underway. It is also to

their credit that the best available help was secured in order that the restoration be as authentic as possible.

Gene Jones, of the Evan Terry firm in Birmingham was selected as the architect, with Nicholas Holmes of Mobile as the consultant. Mr. Holmes had had much experience in restoring old buildings and it was at his suggestion that a builder with similar experiences be secured. Mr. Lewis Mayson of Mobile was hired and soon he and his crew of experienced carpenters began the job of dismantling the old building. Everything original that could be saved was labeled and put aside. Some of the original hardware was still intact upstairs. Other pieces were reproduced for use downstairs. Some of the original window panes were and are still in use. Mantels needed surprisingly little repair and the square nails on the stairway landing are still visible. The old hand-made brick on the outside would not stand removing so they were left in place and were covered by antique brick reproduced near Williamsburg, Virginia to resemble the original as near as possible.

Application was made – and accepted – for listing in the National Register of Historic Places which helped to make the project eligible for partial funding by HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development). Letting no opportunity pass, the plea was carried to politicians and individuals alike who could lend a helping hand. A reward came in a grant from HUD of \$40,000. An opportunity to





When the King House restoration work was completed in 1973-1974, people familiar with it were shocked upon seeing it for the first time because its original Federal style was so different and unexpected from the neo-Victorian appearance it had exhibited for so long.

participate in the project was granted the Alumni membership which resulted in some donations. Each donor's name was inscribed on a plaque which hangs on the wall in King House (this will be an ongoing process). At a total restoration cost of one hundred thousand dollars, it is obvious the need of financial help continues.

Interest increased daily on the project after it got underway. Mr. Mayson was asked to speak to many groups on his findings and evaluation of the old home. Among other things, he found the front and rear rafters of different size. These rafters had been laboriously pitsawed, squared with a broadax, trued with an adz and then sawed with a crosscut saw which involved two men – one standing in a pit and the other on a log or rafter. Apparently no carpenter's level had been used because the southeast corner of the building was six inches higher than the northeast corner. Mayson concluded that the same journeyman made all the doors, mantels, stairs and windowsills with his own particular ruler because they were all off by the same fraction of an inch. It was thought, too, that the original builder had encountered difficulty with the mud bricks crumbling as the stucco removed was found to have cow hair added which made for more strength and durability.

After the building was dismantled and materials evaluated, rebuilding began. Although the underpinnings and joists had endured the years surprisingly well, substantial reinforcement was needed and added. The front porch was left off since there was evidence of it being added after the original house was built. Although no information was available on the kitchen, markings were found to indicate that it was apart from the "big" house. Thus, it was erected on the spot and connected to the main house by a covered walkway. With the completion of the physical structure the house became once again, according to Mr. Holmes, likely the only true Federal period style house in the area.

Furnishing the house was no small part of the project. With no information available as to actual furnishings, reliance had to be placed on what might have been. Many hours were spent in researching the Federal period as to the furniture, colors, types of material, carpets, lighting, etc., and only such items which might have been used at that period have been included. Mr. King was a wealthy man and the home was referred to as the mansion house which led the writer to assume that the furnishings were more than ordinary. Too, information found in files at the Archives Building in Montgomery mentioned lovely pieces of furniture in descendants' possession in New Orleans which came from the old homestead in Montevallo.

It should be noted here, however, that exceptions had to be made in restoration if the house were to be used for something other than viewing. As a practical move, it was decided by the administration and Board of Trustees to use it as an official guest house of the University as well as for other special events on campus. Because of this, central heating and cooling, electrical lighting, bathroom and kitchen facilities were added with the idea of making them as inconspicuous as possible.

And so the "new" old house continues to live and serve. It still receives guests graciously, much as did the family of yore. It is hoped by all who participated in this project that during the next hundred years many more people will be touched by the tradition, love and good will that was so abundantly exhibited in the hearts and home of the illustrious King family of long ago.

Excerpted from *The Lives and Times of Kingswood in Alabama 1817 – 1890* (pages 93-96) written by Golda W. Johnson, wife of then serving president Kermit A. Johnson. Published in 1976 by the University of Montevallo.

In 1973, fifty years ago, the 150 year old King House on the University of Montevallo campus underwent a complete restoration that returned the historic Federal period home of Edmund King to a condition much closer to what it had been upon its completion in 1823.



Once the restoration work on the house had begun, local historian and one of the founding directors of the Montevallo Historical Society, Dr. Mike Mahan, visited the house regularly with his camera and made nearly 100 color slides of the dismantling and restoration work as it progressed for nearly two years.

Following Mike's death in 2018, his good friend and fellow MHS director, Marty Everse, unearthed his King House slides from among thousands of others, and preserved them through scanning as high quality digital color photo TIFF files.

It seems only appropriate that here in 2023, at this 50th anniversary of the completion of the King House restoration, that we are able, for the first time, to publish and share some examples of Mike's unique photographic chronicle of it all.

A slide show of Mike Mahan's King House restoration photos can be viewed at www.historicmontevallo.org.



Hand hewn timbers had been used as original floor joists. They were discovered still intact and usable in the restoration.



This photo shows how the original poorly fired brick had been protected by an application of stucco early in the life of the house.



A new border of regular and "bullnose" brick gave the foundation of the King House an attractive and authentic masonry accent.



Specially trained and skilled brick masons were a must for this job.



A layer of new brick was laid over the old stucco and original brick veneer.



The original profile of the house emerges after removal of the addition.



Rough hewn 1820s-era rafters were also discovered as the house was carefully taken apart during the initial stages of the restoration process.



A revealing example of the homemade bricks used in the construction of King House along with the crude patterns and materials employed in laying them.



This mantelpiece was original to the house. It was sent away to be stripped and returned for reinstallation.



The original detached kitchen was recreated and connected to the house by a covered walkway.



Floor joists exposed and ready to support the new floor.



The rudimentary woodworking tools used to shape and prepare this timber for use can be discerned from the variety of markings they left in the wood.



An experienced historic preservation crew brought with it the craftsmanship needed for good results.



Employing Federal period brick patterns lent a sense of authenticity to the restoration



The original staircase was repaired, reinforced, and refinished for an attractive and safe appearance



**Veterans Wreaths will
be laid at Montevallo
City Cemetery on
Dec. 16, 2023 at
12:00 noon.**

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**Wreaths may be pur-
chased for \$17 each
and you can volunteer
to help at**

www.historicmontevallo.org

.....
**Help us reach this
year's goal of**

375

Wreaths

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