

DOROTHY SCOTT JOHNSON

2409 Dairy Lane
Huntsville, Alabama 35811
(205) 539-9060

May 30, 1994

Dear Gladstone Place Resident:

As an amateur historian and a 23-year resident of the old Chapman home, I would like to point out some items of historical significance in the neighborhood, especially as they concern the stone spring-house and cooling barn. I understand these buildings are in imminent danger of being destroyed. It is chilling to think that over 170 years of history can be wiped out in a few minutes with a bulldozer.

When a subdivision is built, in the name of progress, it is often necessary to destroy certain minor geological, archaeological, or historical features. If any of these features are of major significance then other measures must be taken.

It is difficult to imagine that where you now live was once under a sea, but just west of the spring-house is a sedimentary rock outcrop imbedded with millions of fossilized prehistoric sea creatures.

Before the Indian cession of 1807, the area around the spring was a campground for Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes (mostly Cherokee). Many artifacts such as grindstones and arrowheads have been found to attest to the fact. Some members of the local Archaeology Club have even suggested that the Alabama Historical Commission might like to sponsor an archaeological dig in the area around the spring.

An extremely rare and endangered species of albino, sightless crayfish live in a huge cavern on Cave Hill in northwest Huntsville. During heavy rains these crayfish (some call them shrimp) can be found in the Chapman Spring. According to Dr. Walter Jones, Alabama State Geologist, now deceased, this is the only place in the world these creatures exist. Any radical changes could easily destroy this animal's natural habitat.

The first white settler in the immediate area was Allen Christian who squatted on the land about the time of the Indian cession. He applied to the U. S. Government for a patent believing he was on the land on which rested the spring. When the survey was made in 1809 he found that his land was a few yards south, much to his chagrin.

George Kaiser got the land containing the spring but did not stay long. Christian and Lemuel Mead (the first Circuit Court Clerk and member of the legislature) co-purchased Kaiser's equity in the land in 1810 and finally obtained the patent October 3, 1820.

In 1835 Christian and Mead divided the land, Mead taking the north part and Allen Christian taking the south part with the dividing line being the spring. Christian actually got the spring while Mead was allowed access. The spring was then called Christian Spring and is the headwaters of Spring Branch.

After obtaining the patent in 1820, Christian began to cut trees and made lumber for his home-to-be (now called the Chapman home) and let the lumber cure for about ten years. During that waiting period the stones for the house's foundation and those for the dairy barns were cut (probably by slave labor) from the stone found on the side of the mountain. The stonework in all of these buildings is identical as was the foundation to Gov. Chapman's mansion that stood on the west side of Maysville Road.

Allen Christian died in 1836 and his widow continued to run the farm until she died in 1842. The property was in various hands between the time of her death and October 13, 1849 when it was bought by Philip Woodson for \$7,200. Woodson's daughter and her husband, Augustine Withers, had possession until it was sold to Governor Reuben Chapman on January 21, 1873.

Governor Chapman had owned part of the land for many years (west of Maysville Road where the mansion stood) and four generations of his descendants have called it home. It was during the Chapman era that the dairy with its stone barns became a commercial enterprise that helped sustain Huntsville citizens through three wars and the Great Depression. It is also during this time that more detailed history is known about the place.

In 1889 the dairy was operated by William E. Matthews. During his management an attempt was made to make it a showplace. Roofs of the dairy barns and spring house were shake shingle with typical Victorian fishscale trim. The trim was still in evidence in 1971 when we bought the home.

The spring-house had built-in shelving of stone on which eggs and dairy products for the home were kept cool. Water from the spring was piped to the house, to the tennis courts west of the house, and to the cattle pasture in front of the house. It is known that in the last 72 years the spring has continually run despite some droughts of major proportions.

The dairy herd was composed of registered Jerseys, some imported directly from the Jersey Island. The dairy house, the southernmost of the three buildings, had two rooms downstairs plus upstairs sleeping quarter for Mr. Meadows, the Swiss dairyman. Water was piped from the spring into cooling vats which were located on the north and west sides of the cooling barn and were deep enough to submerge five-gallon milk cans.

The cows were milked in a barn across the lane. After milking, there were carriers to take it immediately to the front room of the dairy where it was strained and canned to be submerged in the vats to cool. It was then bottled and capped and delivered to customers twice daily.

Among the cows were two of exceptional productivity: Signal's Lily Flag and Little Goldie. Unofficial tests showed that Lily Flag's output and the butterfat content of her milk far exceeded that of the current world champion; Little Goldie was a close runnerup.

Lily Flag soon became the talk of the town and on June 2, 1892 a reception was given her. Mr. Meadows sleeked her up, decorated her horns with iris and ribbons, then took her below the barn to receive callers. One hundred five persons registered, greeted her, and were served a glass of her milk. In October, 1891 she was valued at \$10,000 which was the price of many farms in the South at that time.

A "Lily Flag Supper" was given by Mrs. Matthews (a noted cook) on June 22, 1891 to benefit the Presbyterian Church. Sweet milk, cream, butter milk, cottage cheese, ice cream of any flavor, sherbert, boiled custard, Delmonico pudding, blanc mange, and Charlotte russe were made exclusively from her milk and served to the guests. Cakes and other by-products were also served. Few people could believe that one cow could supply the needs of the town.

General Samuel H. Moore, co-owner of Lily Flag, resided in the present Harry Rhett home on Adams Street. He gave a party and invited 1500 guests with Lily Flag as guest of honor. The party has become legendary in Huntsville. There is a subdivision and some businesses named for her today. Few realize she was part of the Chapman Dairy.

In 1894 the Chapman family resumed control and management of the dairy. During the Spanish-American War in 1898 four regiments encamped on Chapman land. On Trinity Sunday, 1898, they arrived at the Chapman place hungry and weary from a delayed trip from Tampa, Florida on short rations. They asked for food, water and permission to lie on the grass and rest. Mrs. Rosalie Chapman (widow of Gov. Chapman's son, Reuben III) stopped her milk wagons and served the soldiers milk from the dairy. The spring furnished water for the thirsty men.

Next to succeed in management of the dairy was Reuben Chapman, IV, and his wife, Josephine Gaboury (the daughter of Joseph Gaboury who introduced the first electric trolley car to the United States in Montgomery, Alabama). Reuben and Josephine managed the dairy through two world wars and the Great Depression. During the depression Josephine said many times, "The little children must have milk," and they were given milk regardless of their parents' ability to pay. No one was ever turned away and it has been said that the dairy sustained the life of Huntsville during that terrible period.

The dairy continued to serve Huntsville's milk needs until after the second world war. At that time homogenization became necessary but Reuben and Josephine felt they were too old to go to the expense and effort of changing over. Too, White Way Milk had been introduced in Huntsville and the community would no longer have to rely on this dairy. They sold their herd and gradually sold off the land to developers but retained 34 acres which included the dairy barns.

The dairy barns are believed to have been built between 1820-1830 and the spring-house earlier, probably 1810-1820. This makes them some of the oldest stone building in the state and certainly in North Alabama.

The Chapman home was the first place outside the city limits to have electricity. It was run to the house in February, 1926 and then extended to the dairy itself.

If, as has been suggested, the cooling barn is bulldozed inward it will be a haven for snakes not to mention the danger to youngsters who will be unable to resist climbing on the rubble.

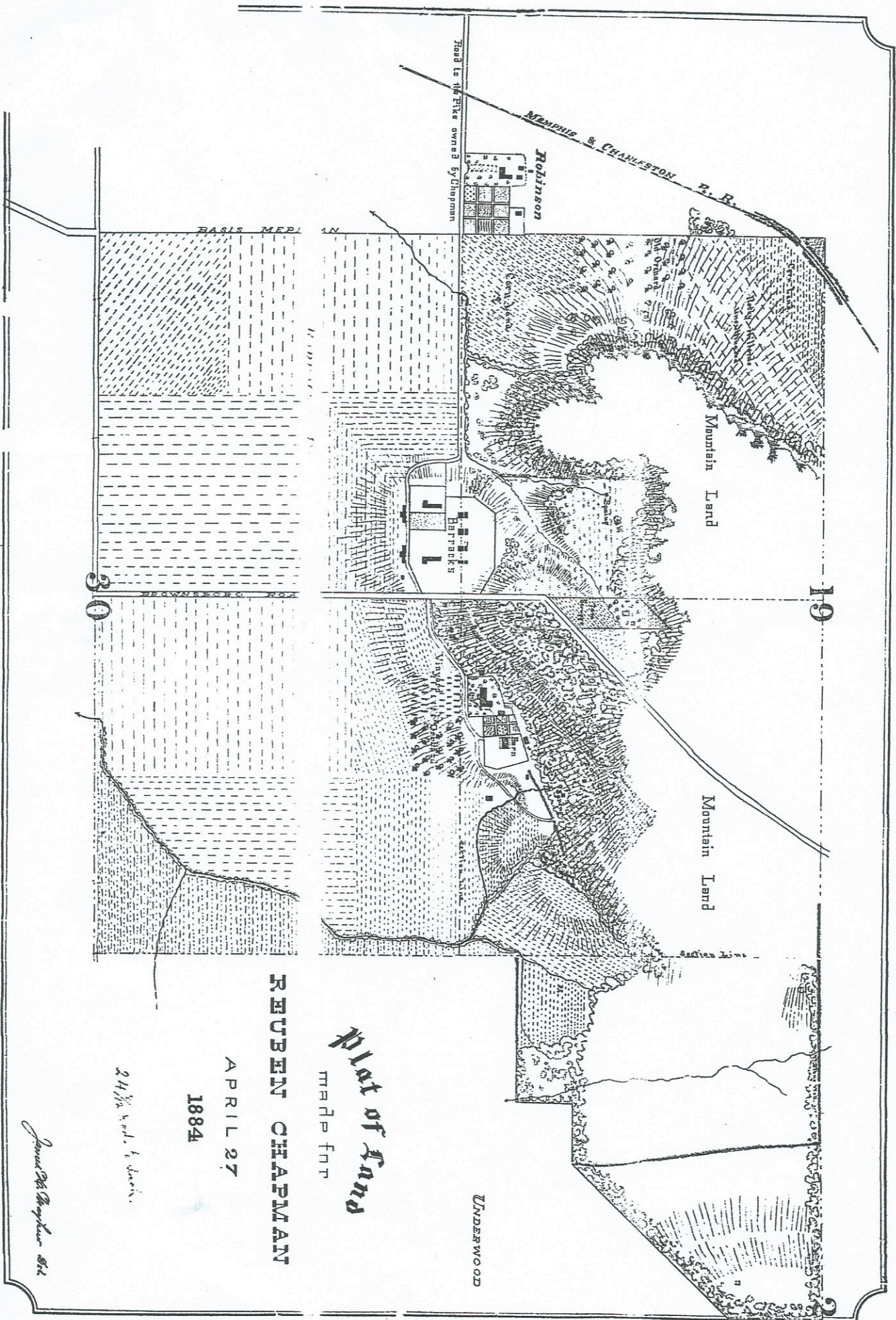
Another major consideration is the fact that restored buildings nestled in their beautiful setting will greatly enhance the resale value of your property. It would be a delightful, unique place for picnics and parties.

Tearing down the spring-house to the height of one block is not restoration—it is mutilation. The destruction of the cooling barn would mean an irreparable loss to the heritage and history of the area. It simply can not be allowed in a civilized society.

I urge you to reject the destruction of these historical buildings. They need not be restored at once. History was made one step at a time; restoration can be done in the same manner.

Sincerely,

Dorothy Scott Johnson
(Mrs Walter H.)



Plot of Land

made for

RUBEN CHAPMAN

APRIL 27

1884

24 1/2 m. x 10 m. to 1/2 m. in

James M. Rayburn Sr.