

"TIDEWATER COTTAGES" IN THE TENNESSEE VALLEY

(Thematic Group)

Owner: Mr. and Mrs. William Wright  
P. O. Box 279  
Florence, Ala. 35631

Historic name: Peter F. Armistead, Sr. House  
Common name: Peter F. Armistead, Sr. House

Location: Lauderdale County approximately three miles west of Florence on the north side of Waterloo Road.

Acreeage: 30 UTM: A-16/432/090/3855/610  
B-16/432/270/3855/680  
C-16/432/700/3855/190  
D-16/432/550/3855/140

Verbal Boundary: See attached Ad Valorem Tax Map.

Date of Construction: c 1825

Statement of Significance:

Criterion C - Architecture:

The Peter F. Armistead, Sr. House is an excellent example of an Alabama "Tidewater cottage." It is the only double pile, wood frame example in this thematic group and the only one with a plan featuring a large center room at the back of the stair hall (see attached plan). The house is further distinguished by virtue of being a clear copy of the builder's ancestral home in Virginia, making it one of the best examples in the group of the transfer of architectural tradition from the eastern seaboard into Alabama.

Criteria A & B - Exploration/Settlement:

The Armistead House is significant for its associations with the development of large slave-based cotton plantations in Alabama's Tennessee Valley by descendants of wealthy Virginia planter families. Peter F. Armistead and his wife Martha were both the descendants of "aristocratic" families of Virginia. Like many others of their wealth and social status, the Armisteads sold their Virginia property and migrated to North Alabama in the early 1820s. In the 1840s, Peter Armistead, Sr. moved on into Mississippi following a progressive westward migration pattern of that period.

Integrity:

The Armistead House has retained its integrity of location, design, setting, to some degree its materials, workmanship and feeling. The basic original exterior form of the house is still clearly visible in spite of the small one story end additions, the absence of two exterior chimneys and the recent front and back porch additions. While some of the exterior materials have been lost including original weatherboarding, roofing and some window sash, the interior fabric (baseboards, mantels, chair rails, doors, flooring, architraves, wainscoting) is almost completely intact. The unusual

first floor plan is also unaltered with the exception of one bathroom addition and the removal of two fireplaces.

#### Description:

The Peter F. Armistead, Sr. House is a one-and-a-half story, five-bay, frame house with a gable roof which has three cross gable dormers on both the front and the back. Originally, there were two chimneys on either gable end of the house, but currently there is only one chimney left standing on each end. The house is covered with prefabricated wood weatherboard. Both the front and back porticos are recent additions as are the two one-story end wings. The front portico is a reproduction of the portico on "Glen Ella," the original owner's ancestral home, in Culpeper County, Virginia.

The interior is remarkably well preserved and in immaculate condition with at least ninety per cent of its original woodwork including cross and Bible doors, chair rails, baseboards, architraves, etc. The original front door transom has been enclosed and the accompanying original sidelights replaced with multipaned stained glass. The first floor plan is unique among the eight houses in this thematic group. It has a double pile configuration with a center stair hall that is terminated at the back by a large center room which was probably originally used as a parlor (see attached plan and photo 7). The basic original floor plan is unchanged except for the removal of two fireplaces and the addition of a small bathroom.

The full basement is subdivided into two rooms by a partition. Each room has a fireplace with an arched brick opening (currently covered) and an original mantel.

The house is remarkably similar, at least on the exterior, to Mrs. Armistead's ancestral home called "Glen Ella" in Culpeper County, Virginia (see attached illustration).

Originally there were two cemeteries on the property, one for the slaves and another for the white owners. The black cemetery is intact and is still being used (see photographs 3 & 4). The white cemetery, however, has been plowed over leaving only two tombstones on the property that are no longer located on their respective grave sites.

#### Historical Summary:

This house stands on land first purchased by Peter Fontaine Armistead from the Federal government on 7 March 1818.<sup>1</sup> Stylistic features--including moldings, doorways, and mantelpiece design--suggests that the dwelling was erected soon after the initial purchase, probably in the early 1820s.

The Armistead house is unique among the structures in this thematic grouping in that it may possibly be linked to a specific prototype, namely Mrs. Armistead's paternal home near Brandy Station in Culpeper County, Virginia. Now known as "Glen Ella," this house was built about 1799 by Dr. Isaac Winston, the father of Martha Henry (Winston) Armistead.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the similarity between the Alabama and Virginia houses is so strong that it is difficult to imagine that the Armisteads did not have in mind the basic form of the latter when they constructed their Alabama plantation residence.

Both Peter and Martha Winston Armistead were natives of Culpeper County. The second son of Bowles and Mary (Fontaine) Armistead, Peter F. Armistead of Alabama descended from Colonel John Armistead of "Hesse," in Gloucester County, Virginia--the

<sup>1</sup>Lauderdale County Tractbook, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Culpeper Historical Society, Inc., Historic Culpeper (Culpeper, VA.: Privately published, 1974), p. 45.

17th-century progenitor of the family in North America. Through numerous intermarriages over several generations, the Armisteads were closely allied with the Carters, the Lees, the Berkeleys, the Byrds, and other leading families of colonial Virginia. The Reverend Peter Fontaine, a prominent 18th-century clergyman, was another of Armistead's distinguished forebears. For her part, Mrs. Armistead was a cousin of both Patrick Henry and Dolly Madison and, like her husband, connected by blood to the agrarian gentry of pre-Revolutionary Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1819 and 1822, the Armisteads liquidated their Virginia holdings, selling their home plantation in Culpeper County to George Thom in 1821, at which time they are mentioned as living in Lauderdale County, Alabama.<sup>4</sup> Their newly-opened Alabama plantation was situated some five miles northwest of Florence, amid the fertile, rolling countryside bordering Cypress Creek. A number of their Armistead kin settled in the same vicinity, but their homes have long since disappeared.

The Armisteads were among the original communicants of Trinity Episcopal Church, Florence, and in 1836 Peter Fontaine Armistead was elected senior warden of the vestry. In 1849, a daughter of the household, Ellen Armistead, married the Reverend Jonathan B. T. Smith, rector of Trinity Church. A child of this union, Martha, is buried in the family graveyard near the Armistead residence.<sup>5</sup>

Besides Ellen Armistead Smith, eleven other children were born to Peter and Martha Winston Armistead both before and after they settled in Alabama. These included Peter Fontaine Armistead, Jr. (1810-1908) of "Melrose," Colbert County, another of the houses encompassed by this theme study.

Mrs. Armistead would live out her life in Lauderdale County. During the late 1840s, however, her husband--though now well into middle age--left the Tennessee Valley for Panola County, Mississippi. The circumstances of his departure are shrouded in mystery. Ostensibly, he was lured by the newer cotton country to the west. Yet persistent oral tradition also cites marital difficulties and Armistead's illicit relations with slave women on the plantation--liaisons that resulted in a number of mulatto offspring.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the cause of Armistead's departure, his wife remained behind in Alabama and continued to live at the plantation home near Florence until her death on August 3, 1870, at the age of eighty-eight. Martha Winston Armistead was laid to rest in the private cemetery beside the graves of other family members. (During the early 1900s, this cemetery was destroyed save for two stones).

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<sup>3</sup> Armistead genealogy in William and Mary Quarterly (Series 1), vol. 6 (1897-98), p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> Culpeper County, VA Deedbook NN, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Holland Lancaster and Joshua Winn III, Gathering Up Our Sheaves with Joy: A History of Trinity Episcopal Church, 1824-1976 (Nashville: Williams Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 11, 13, 32, 54, 233. Another burial in the family plot, during the 1850s was that of a certain "Mrs. Brooks." Mrs. Brooks' grave has disappeared, but the Rev. Mr. George White noted in the parish register of Trinity Church that she was "a widow, the grand-grand-daughter of Patrick Henry, a member of the Methodist Church" and, added Mr. White, "a pious Christian, as I learn."

<sup>6</sup> Manuscript notes of Mrs. William P. Wright, including interview with George Armistead (black), reputedly a natural descendant of Peter F. Armistead, Sr.

In 1877, Thomas S. Broadfoot purchased the plantation from the Armistead heirs. The house subsequently entered a long period of neglect before being purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Howard Wright, parents of the present owner, in 1936. Since 1975, the house has been gradually rehabilitated by the current occupants, Mr. and Mrs. William P. Wright, including restoration of the nine-over-nine window sashing which had been removed. Severe deterioration of the original weatherboarding necessitated covering the exterior of the house with synthetic siding during the mid-1970s.<sup>7</sup> A kitchen wing and carport have also been added to the northwest corner. The interior of the house faithfully recalls, however, its original character.

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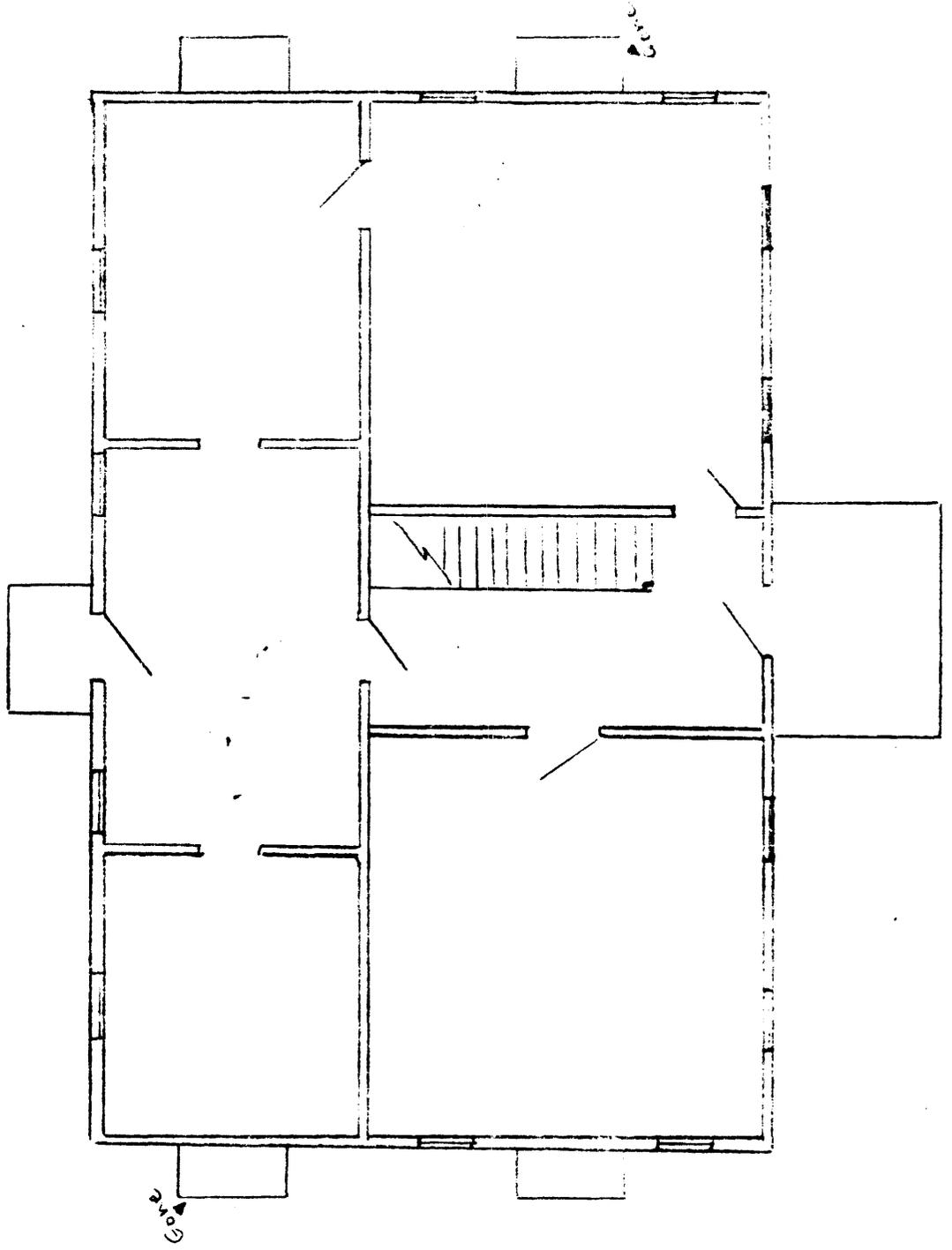
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