

"TIDEWATER COTTAGES" IN THE TENNESSEE VALLEY

(Thematic Group)

Owner: David W. Whitehorn  
Rt. 4, Box 154  
Athens, Alabama 35611

Historic name: Green Pryor Rice House  
Common name: Gilchrist Place

Location: Morgan County near Somerville, Ala., one fourth mile north of Rt. 684.

Acreage: 3/4  
UTM: A-16/518/800/3814/810  
B-16/518/880/3814/810  
C-16/518/900/3814/760  
D-16/518/800/3814/760

Verbal Boundary: see attached Ad Valorem Tax Map

Date of Construction: C 1835

Statement of Significance:

Criterion C - Architecture:

The Green Pryor Rice House is an excellent example of a "Tidewater cottage" distinguished by the use of Flemish bond brickwork on all sides of the house, a molded brick cornice rarely seen in Alabama, a facade with two separate front entries and an unusual first floor plan. These features, along with the fine brickwork, illustrate the strong transfer of craft tradition from Virginia into northern Alabama. The unusual curve molded brick cornice can be traced directly back to the ancestral home of the original owner in Rockbridge County, Virginia, where similar cornices are still common.

Criterion B - Politics/Government:

This property is significant for its associations with Judge Green Pryor Rice (1795-1857) who served a number of terms (1838-1855) in the Alabama legislature including two terms as president of the Senate (1839-1842). Judge Rice lived in the house from c 1842 until his death, but the property remained in Rice Family hands until 1900.

Criteria A & B - Exploration/Settlement:

The Rice House was built by Matthew Houston who emigrated from Rockbridge County, Virginia via East Tennessee into North Alabama following the migration pattern of the period. Mr. Houston, however, like many others remained in North Alabama less than ten years before moving on southwest into Sumter County, Alabama in 1837 as new cotton producing land became available.

### Integrity:

The Green Pryor Rice House has excellent integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling. The site has remained rural, surrounded by open fields and woodlands, despite its close proximity to the nearby town of Somerville. The original form and building materials of the house are unaltered, and it retains its unusual features such as Flemish bond brickwork, molded brick cornice, double front entries and unusual floor plan. In addition, the original interior is almost completely intact including plaster, flooring, doors and paneled wainscoting.

The only features which appear to have been lost are the original roof covering (now seamed metal), two mantels and some of the original window sash. The house is currently undergoing a careful restoration by the present owner.

### Description:

The Green Pryor Rice House is a one-and-a-half story, five-bay, brick house with a metal gable roof. There are three cross gable dormers across the facade. On either gable end of the house is a single exterior chimney. At the back is a gabled brick ell. In the angle of the ell and the main block is an enclosed porch which was once open. Still in evidence on the porch are three early chamfered support posts (see photograph 5). One of the unique exterior features of this house is Flemish bond brickwork on all sides rather than simply across the front as is more common with houses of this period. At the rear of the house is an early frame outbuilding (see photo 6).

The facade is distinctive in that there are two separate, symmetrically located, front entries with transoms. The roofline is decorated with an unusual curved molded brick cornice (see photograph 4). There are only two other known residential examples of this type of cornice in the state. Above each 9/9 window and each entry is a brick jack arch.

The interior first floor plan of the main block is unusual when compared with others in this thematic study (see attached plan). In the middle of the single pile arrangement is a center room instead of the usual central hallway. The simple paneled wainscoting is all original as are the doors (cross and Bible and batten types), baseboards and chair rails. The fireplace mantels in the main block section of the house were stolen but a photo was made of one of them prior to its disappearance (see photo 11). An original enclosed stairway to the second floor is located off of the back porch. There are two rear entries into the main house corresponding to the two front entries.

The interior of the rear ell was probably used as a dining room and kitchen or sitting room (see attached plan). The fireplace at the rear of the ell has a very simple Greek Revival mantel, and the rest of the woodwork corresponds to that in the front portion of the house.

### Historical Summary:

The land on which the Rice-Gilchrist house stands was originally patented by Abraham Skidmore on July 9, 1818. The builder of the house itself seems to have been the second owner of the property, Matthew Cyrus Houston. An early postmaster of Somerville, as well as Clerk of the Circuit Court, Houston received title to the 80-acre tract from Skidmore on February 11, 1829, for the sum of six hundred dollars.

The house was probably built between this date and 1837, when Houston left the Tennessee Valley and moved to Livingston, Alabama.<sup>1</sup>

The Houston family roots lay in Rockbridge County, Virginia, from which they had emigrated, first, to East Tennessee, then to northern Alabama. This link with the Valley of Virginia may account for the occurrence on the house of the unusual "rolled" or molded brick cornices, a feature characteristic of if not peculiar to western Virginia and especially Rockbridge County.

From Houston, the house passed into the possession of Judge Green Pryor Rice. Judge Rice, who served several terms in the State legislature and in 1839 was elected president of the Senate, continued to occupy the house until his death in 1857. Two of his grandsons, both born at the Rice house during the 1860s, also pursued political careers. They were Samuel D. Weakley, legislator and Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, and Malcolm Rice Patterson, who was destined to become governor of Tennessee.<sup>2</sup>

In 1900, the Rice family sold their Somerville house to John W. and Amanda Gilchrist,<sup>3</sup> whose heirs held it until the 1960s. It was during the Gilchrist ownership that major physical changes were made to the exterior of the house, including replacement of most of the original sashing and construction in 1927 of a bungalow-type porch across the front. A large central dormer was also added at that time. Abandoned around 1950, the house was purchased from the Gilchrists by Alfred D. and Wendolyn Stephens, who in turn sold it to David Whitehorn in 1980.

The house is currently undergoing restoration. In 1983, appropriate nine-over-nine sashing from the demolished Benjamin Gullett house in Eutaw was installed, and in 1984 the incongruous and badly deteriorated bungalow-type porch was removed to restore the facade to its original appearance.

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<sup>1</sup>Morgan County Tractbook; also Morgan County Deed Record B, pp. 20 and 94, and Morgan County Deed Record D, p. 590.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas M. Owen, History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1921), vol. IV, pp. 1327, 1432, and 1734.

<sup>3</sup>Morgan County Deed Record 58, pp. 400-01.



Molded brick cornice on  
Green Pryor Rice House