

"TIDEWATER COTTAGES" IN THE TENNESSEE VALLEY

(Thematic Group)

Owner: E. Eugene Glenn
Rt. 1, Box 130
Decatur, AL 35601

Historic name: Dr. William E. Murphey House
Common name: Dr. William E. Murphey House

Location: Morgan County near Trinity, Alabama, approximately one mile north of
U. S. Rt. 72 (Joe Wheeler Highway)

Acreage: 163
UTM: A-16/490/340/3833/960
B-16/491/160/3833/940
C-16/491/160/3833/115
D-16/490/340/3833/115

Verbal Boundaries: T.5S.R.5W. N.W. $\frac{1}{4}$ of S. 6, includes house located on original
plat still in possession of current owners.

Date of Construction: c 1830

Statement of Significance:

Criterion C - Architecture:

The Dr. William Murphey House is the only example in this thematic group of a hall and parlor plan rarely found in Alabama. The house is an excellent representation of a smaller, less formal "Tidewater cottage" linked in overall form and feeling to more academic versions such as nearby "Bride's Hill" or "The Green Onion." The treatment of the stone chimneys can be traced directly to the upper Piedmont region of North Carolina from which the builder came. There is evidence on the rear slope of a very unusual overlapping board roof which may be the only Alabama example in existence. The original rear ell extension is one of three examples in this thematic group.

Criteria A & B - Exploration/Settlement:

The Murphey House is significant for its association with the establishment of large, slave-based cotton plantations in Alabama's Tennessee Valley by the descendants and relatives of a planter family of North Carolina. The Murphey family emigrated from Franklin County, North Carolina into northern Alabama in the early 1820s. Their migration pattern was typical of that period. Unlike many of their neighbors, however, the Murpheys remained in Alabama instead of continuing on into Mississippi when it was opened for settlement a few years later.

Integrity:

The Murphey House has retained its integrity of location, design, its materials to some degree, workmanship setting and feeling. The overall architectural form of a typical "Tidewater cottage" is still very much intact. The rare hall and parlor floor plan is

unaltered. Most of the original architectural features and construction materials, such as the unusual stone chimneys, interior wood paneling, baseboards, mantels and doors have all survived. In addition, the shiplapped rear elevation is undisturbed.

The original roofing (which may have been a rare example of overlapping board) has been replaced with a corrugated metal covering. An early rear chimney has been replaced with a combination stone and cinderblock flue. The metal shed roofed front porch is an obvious later addition.

Description:

The Dr. William E. Murphey House is a one-and-a-half story frame, three bay, ell-shaped cottage resting on stone piers. There is a stone, exterior, fireplace chimney on either end of the main block. These chimneys are the only stone examples among the seven houses in this thematic group. The top of each chimney is decorated with a corbeled stone band (see photographs) which is a distinctive feature found in chimneys of the same period in Franklin County, North Carolina where the Murphey family lived prior to their emigration to Alabama. The main block has almost the same exterior dimensions (39 x 20) as the Bracken House in Williamsburg Virginia (see attached illustration). Across the facade is a deteriorated metal shed roofed porch, which is not original. At the back of the house is a metal gable roofed ell with a combination stone and cinderblock flue.

The interior is single pile and is the only example in this thematic group of a hall and parlor plan (see attached plan). The existing original woodwork includes horizontal wall paneling, two mantels which are transitional between the Federal and Greek Revival styles, and both cross and Bible and horizontal paneled doors (see interior photographs). Access to the second floor is by way of an enclosed winding stair. There is some evidence in the attic of an original overlapping board roof on the back slope of the main block.

Historical Summary

This structure, possibly the oldest house now standing in Morgan County, is believed to have been erected for the Murphey family--early settlers from the upper piedmont of North Carolina. Although the tract on which the house is situated was first patented by Malcolm Gilchrist on July 15, 1818, Federal land records indicate that the immediately adjoining parcel of 159 acres was entered on the same date by the assignees of George Murphey (erroneously spelled "Murphree" in the Morgan County tractbook).¹ Gilchrist himself was a surveyor who acquired numerous scattered parcels, for speculative purposes along the Tennessee River at the Huntsville land sales of 1818.² It is conceivable, then, that he sold his own tract to Murphey soon after its initial purchase. Unfortunately, the instrument of conveyance has not been located.

George Murphey was born on April 7, 1774, in Franklin County, near the North Carolina border with Virginia. By 1810, however, Murphey was living in neighboring Warren County--the birthplace of his wife, Mary P. Kimbell Murphey (1788-1824). In

¹ Margaret Mathews Cowart, Old Land Records of Morgan County, Alabama (Huntsville: Privately published, 1981), p. 194.

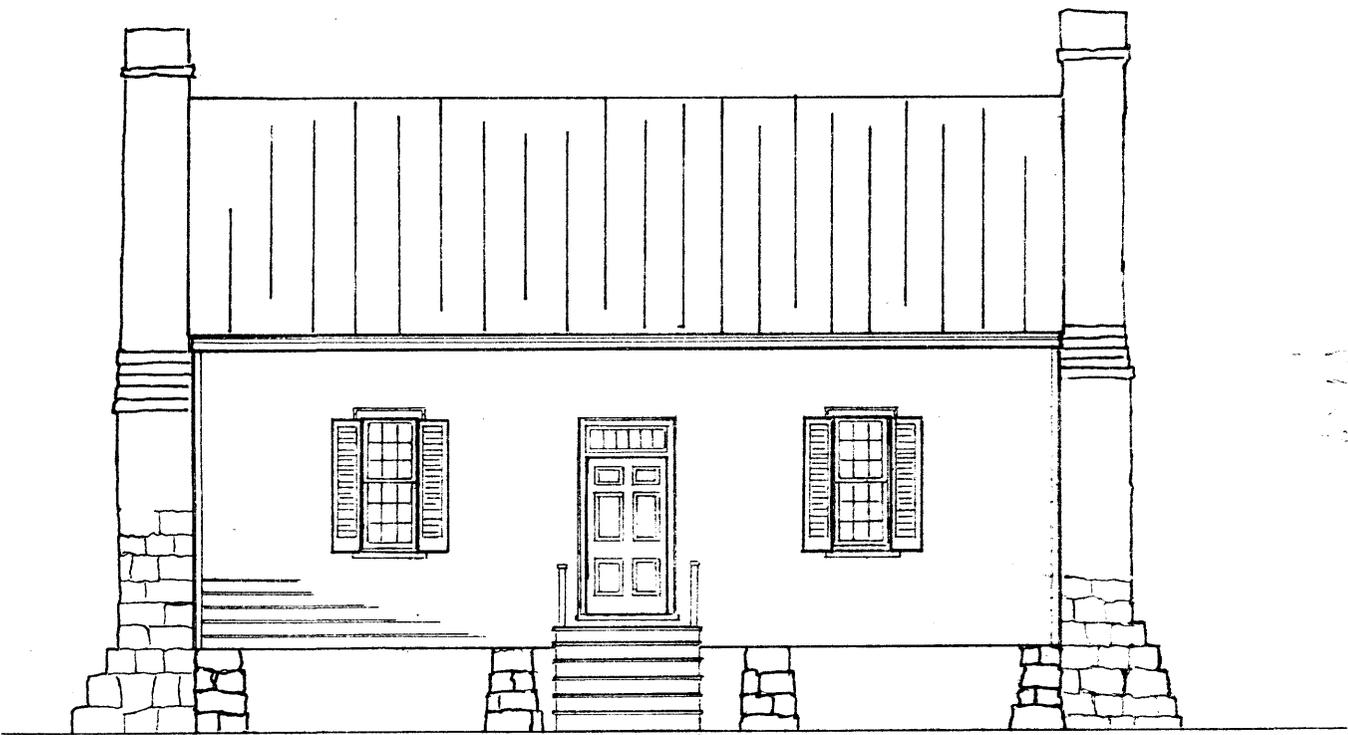
² James Edmonds Saunders and Elizabeth Blair Saunders Stubbs, Early Settlers of Alabama (New Orleans: Privately published, 1899); reprinted by Genealogical Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1969), p. 227.

1821, the Murpheys emigrated to Madison County, Alabama, and two years later they and their family moved southward across the Tennessee River to take up the land George Murphey had previously acquired in Morgan County.³ Again we must theorize that the house standing today may have been erected at that time. Certainly it is the kind of house that could have been a typical yeoman's dwelling of southside Virginia or upper North Carolina, while at least one of its features--the massive chimneys of stone, with a thin beltcourse just below the top--is a peculiar characteristic of vernacular architecture in the specific area from whence the Murphey family had come to Alabama. (The typical early 19th-century Alabama chimney is corbeled at the very top, in contrast to the treatment of the Murphey house chimneys.) The Murphey house was modest in comparison to some of the fine dwellings built a few years later in Morgan County, but during the early 1820s--when few timber-frame structures of any kind existed in the area--it would have been exceptionally commodious.

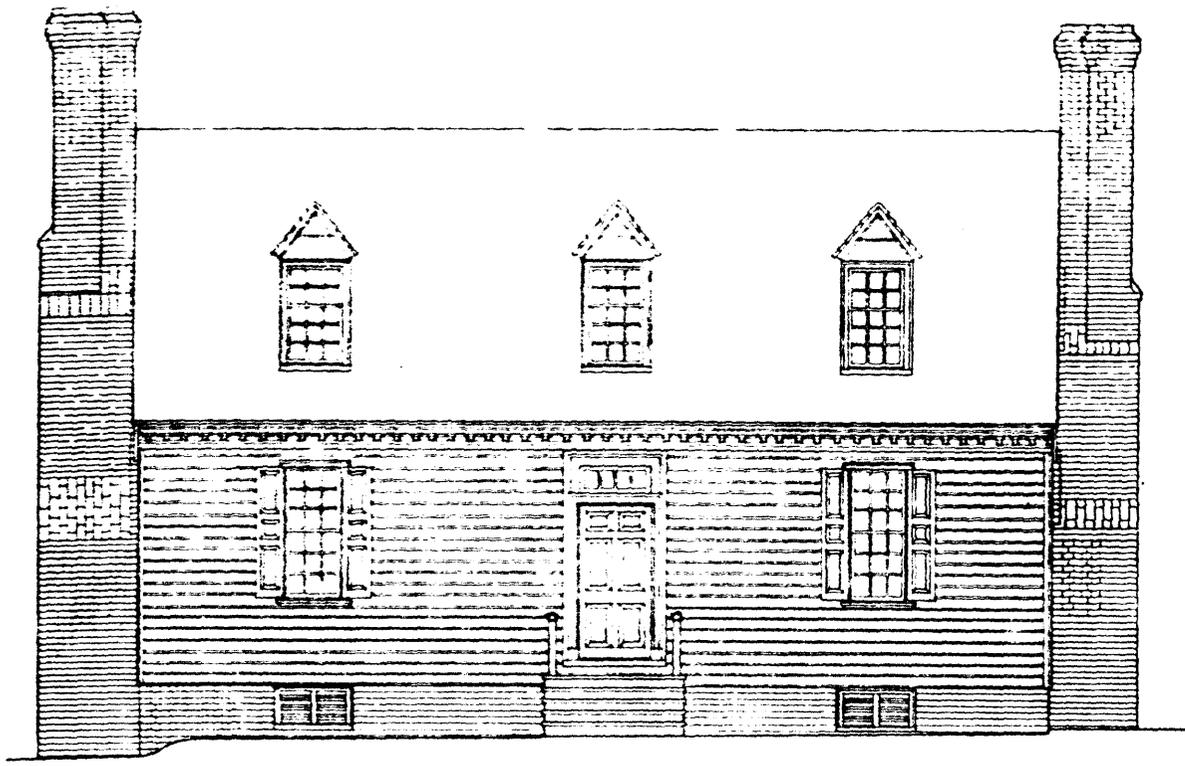
Eventually, the house passed to George Murphey's son, Dr. William E. Murphey. Dr. Murphey left no heirs, and upon his death in 1889 the Murphey farm was sold by his executor, his friend and neighbor Jeremiah Elliott, to William V. Neville. From this period on, the dwelling itself was evidently remanded to use as a tenant house while the acreage around it remained under cultivation. The W. W. Wheeler family owned the property between 1910 and 1946, when it was sold to John B. Sewell of Trinity. In 1950, the land became part of the Glenn dairy farm.⁴ Unoccupied for many years, the house is now used for hay storage.

³This information is found on Murphey's gravestone in the Wimbley Cemetery, half a mile southeast of the house-site. See Marilyn Sue Short Marine and Ivydene Simpson Walls, Morgan County, Alabama, Cemeteries, (Hartselle: Marine/Walls Historical Publications, 1984), vol. II, p. 258.

⁴Morgan County Deedbook 37, p. 53, Morgan County Courthouse, Decatur. Morgan County Tax Books, 1910-1950, Morgan County Courthouse, Decatur.



Hand-drawn architectural elevation of the Thurkney House facade. The drawing shows a two-story structure with a stone base and a wood-paneled upper section. The ground floor features a central door with a small porch and two windows with shutters. The upper floor is entirely covered in vertical wood paneling. The drawing is framed by corner marks.



Brackin House, Wmsburg
(compare with Murphey House)