

# Uncoverings 1981

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## Regarding the Discovery of the Cedar Heights Quilt Collection in Lower Chattahoochee Valley, Alabama

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All throughout Alabama, Indian names such as Eufaula, Tuskegee, Tuscaloosa, Tombigbee, Chattahoochee and Cahaba appear like gravestones on the Alabama countryside. Many of Alabama's counties, towns and rivers retain their original Indian names that echo the region's past heritage. In the early 1800s southeast Alabama was populated with numerous tribes of Creek Indians. A clan of Creek Indians, known as the Eufaulas discovered a high bluff on the western bank of the Chattahoochee River that became known as the village of Eufaula.<sup>1</sup>

The settling of white men into Eufaula and throughout the state in the early 1800s was an infringement on Indian lands and rights with the end result being many dark, tragic pages in Alabama's history. Here, as in neighboring states, Indians were pushed from their land and moved westward to new homes, such as Eufaula, Oklahoma. Many died in the process of being sent west on a trail of blood and broken promises, known as the "Trail of Tears."<sup>2</sup>

Where humble Indian homesites once existed, the town of Irwinton, later renamed Eufaula, began to grow during the second quarter of the 19th century. Riverboat traffic on the Chattahoochee River and later, the building of a railroad helped the town thrive. Today, Greek Revival mansions stand along the broad, well-planned streets as landmarks of a time when Eufaula flourished with an economy based on land, cotton and slaves.<sup>3</sup>

A community known as Glennville, located 20 miles north of Eufaula, was settled in 1835. Glennville was becoming a progressive community where streets were laid out and two colleges and a travelers' inn were built. When the railroad bypassed Glennville, the area suffered greatly from the changing tides of economic forces, relocation of roads and a shifting population. Today, few landmarks

remain to note the location of Glennville and many other such old communities.<sup>4</sup> In Glennville, the colleges were burned years ago and the stores have vanished, but many feel that nearby plantations and pecan orchards conceal perhaps some of the most romantic and difficult to trace country homes in the state. Road maps won't tell you where they are located and even the country stores where one could once ask directions are now closed, making the discovery of old plantation homes a matter of happenstance.<sup>5</sup>

When King Cotton lost its lofty throne, even established towns were affected. As people began to leave the town of Eufaula and the surrounding plantations and farms, Eufaula became a sleepy Southern town—still proud and aristocratic, but rather sluggish nonetheless. Today, this picturesque area attracts numerous visitors seeking to see the historic homes that are kept in repair with very few changes to their basic structure. Eufaula's annual pilgrimage receives national recognition as visitors tour impressive homes, mostly private residences, open to the public only during the pilgrimage. Efforts are made to restore and preserve the homes while retaining their original beauty.<sup>6</sup>

Broad streets that are now embellished with brilliant azaleas and snowy dogwoods, and covered by a canopy of stately water oaks reinforce the attitude that residents of Eufaula take time "to remember." Perhaps everyone's lives appear linked together because all the generations have known their past heritage.

While on the 1981 Pilgrimage of Homes, we were introduced to Ms. Gertha Puryear Holmes, an outstanding person in her community and in the state. Ms. Holmes, a retired English teacher, is now the general manager of Cedar Heights Plantation—once a thriving cotton plantation, but now reverted to forest and managed for wood products. One cannot find an individual with a more receptive attitude about sharing her life with other people. Ms. Holmes' talents and interests have never included quilting, but her fingers remained nimble as church organist for over 30 years, and she is on more state-and community-related committees than Carter has oats!

Regarding the history of Cedar Heights, Ms. Holmes shared the following information:

The Glenn-Thompson-Holmes plantation home sits upon rural land once inhabited by Creek Indians. The original section of land was deeded to Samuel B. Benton by President Martin Van Buren in 1835. Benton sold the land to Massilon McKendree Glenn, the elder son of Reverend James Glenn, the founder of Glennville. Massilon McKendree Glenn, a leading voice in literary societies, was the

*Cedar Heights Plantation Home*

President of the Board of Trustees of the Glennville Female Academy. The construction of the house around 1837 makes it historically significant as one of the earliest residences built in eastern Alabama after the Creek Cession of 1832. Glenn, using skilled plantation carpenters, built the house which consisted of a central hall with flanking rooms and a kitchen wing offset with a breezeway to the main house. In 1840, George Hargraves Thompson, a wealthy successful agriculturist, acquired the land and house from Glenn, a swap because Mrs. Glenn liked Mrs. Thompson's house and Mrs. Thompson liked Mrs. Glenn's house. Thompson added the rear wing during the 1840s. The house has been enlarged and revitalized by the addition of more rooms and conveniences. Through all the change its original character and personality have been preserved.

The white frame building with its 10" × 10" hand-hewn sills and pegged construction is an early example of Greek Revival architecture in Alabama. The house is architecturally noteworthy because it represents a blend of architectural style, some being Victorian in origin. Greek Revival traits include the general room arrangement, the double-door entrance with rectangular transom and sidelights, the

small colonnaded portico, and the half-story sleeping attic lacking a fireplace. The bay windows, beveled posts, and ornate octagon balusters appear to be Victorian embellishments. All rooms have 13-foot ceilings, 1-inch baseboards, original heart-pine floors, original mantels and most of the glass which was made on the plantation. The historical significance of the house lies not only in its age and past status, but also in the fact that it is of a type rarely found nowadays in the lower Chattahoochee Valley—a reminder of a past era, a symbol of gentility and success.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Holmes is very gracious to open her unique home for the public to enjoy. She recounts making the decision to become a participant in the Pilgrimage of Homes as an effort to better help her grandchildren gain an appreciation for the historical significance of their Grandmother's home and furnishings. Visitors to Cedar Heights continuously express amazement and fascination at how the family has maintained and preserved their heritage while living in an atmosphere that depicts utmost style. The home appears warm and inviting, yet elegant and rich with gorgeous furnishings.

Ms. Holmes recalled her sons actually had a different perspective about the house than most people. As young boys, she wondered why they never invited their friends home. They said it was because all the furniture at Cedar Heights was so old! The beds were too high and everything was just old-fashioned!

As we toured the home, my attention was drawn to an all-silk Caesar's Crown patchwork quilt in one of the bedrooms. Ms. Holmes was delighted with my interest in her quilt. She indicated there were several more old quilts and graciously invited us back to see them. Only two weeks passed before we returned to photograph and measure the collection of quilts that were stored in the attic. This collection maintained in its authentic surroundings is accented by the extraordinary wealth of documentation of family records and quilt-makers' personal histories. Historical significance in the quilts comes not only from their age and quality of workmanship, but also because Ms. Holmes threatened to get rid of all "those old quilts upstairs" several years ago. I recall her saying it was her quiltmaker-mother and aunt who warned her to never throw those quilts away—but to always keep them on the plantation!

Ms. Holmes readily admits she never particularly cared much for the quilts. They had always been around and were taken for granted. She recalls times the quilting frames were set up on the front porch continuously during warm weather. Her mother, Katie Bell Thompson Puryear, was an avid quiltmaker during the 1930s and 1940s. Her

patchwork quilts are easily recognizable as being from the Depression era. None of the quilts in the collection appear to be signed or dated. Dating these quilts by their fabric, piecedwork and applique patterns will involve much time and more expertise than I have at the present time. These following quilts were viewed at Cedar Heights.

### *Quilt Collection*

#### 1. LONE STAR #1

Cottons and calicoes in green, red and yellow; yellow background. 102 × 102 inches.

Handpieced and handquilted bed quilt. Contains cotton batting, very thin. Border has a shell quilting design. Background area beyond the star points are quilted in a repetitious diamond quilting design. The lining appears to be hand woven fabric, measuring 26 inches wide.

#### 2. CAESAR'S CROWN

Silk fabric. 78 × 91 inches.

Quilt is made of 12-inch blocks and 4-inch sashing. Some of the silks within the crown patterns are so similar that the overall design is lost due to lack of contrast. Of all the quilts viewed, this one is showing the most need of restoration. Fabric deterioration is occurring over the entire quilt. The silks are brittle and break each time the quilt is handled. Lining appears very thin, loose woven.

#### 3. SINGLE IRISH CHAIN

Cottons were originally green, red and white. 81 × 94 inches.

Quilt is made up of 8-inch blocks that contain 1½-inch squares. Quilt is hand stitched and handquilted with what appears to be coarse wrapping thread. A separate binding was attached and is curved at corners. The cotton batting appears smooth and carded. The fabrics that presently appear to be brown are deep red and green when seen in the seams. Lining and light fabric in the top appear to have been white. Was quilted with a shell quilting design.

#### 4. WHIG'S DEFEAT

Cotton and calicoes in green, red and gold; white background. 78 × 78½ inches.

Quilt is made up of nine 25-inch blocks. Center motif features an oak leaf applique worked with fine stitches. Is heavily quilted with what appears to be waxed thread. A diamond shaped motif is quilted in the open areas. The cotton batting appears smooth and

carded. Quilt is self-bound with top pulled to the back. Quilt has been damaged by mice.

5. WHIG ROSE

Cotton in red, green and yellow. 82 × 82 inches.

Quilt is made up of four squares set together with a triple lattice sashing. Pieced work was sewn by hand; applique was machine stitched. Borders are stitched in a zig-zag quilting design. Other quilting designs include rosettes, leaves and heart shapes. Fabric that now appears to be brown was apparently green. Quilt has a separate binding. Cotton seeds can be seen within the quilt batting.

6. LONE STAR #2

Cotton calicoes in yellow, green and red prints, set in repetitions. 100 × 101½ inches.

Quilt's border appears to be made of flour sacks. Lining is a heavy weave—possibly homespun with repetitious stripes. Quilt is self-bound and has been quilted with a shell quilting design.

7. PINE TREE

Solid cottons in red, white and blue. 88 × 93 inches.

Quilt is made out of 16 × 17-inch blocks and features triple lattice sashing. Quilt is handpieced and is handquilted with red, white and black thread. Sashing features diamond quilting design; border features shell design and quilted leaf and rosette stencils fill open areas. Quilting stitches are similar to Whig Rose Quilt.

8. LILY QUILT

Cottons and calicoes in green, yellow and rust. 85½ × 87 inches.

Quilt is handpieced with machine stitching on applique stems. It has twenty-five 13-inch blocks with triple lattice sashing. Quilting thread was used. Quilt has a separate binding. Sashing features diamond quilting design. Handquilting appears consistent with the Whig Rose Quilt.

9. T BLOCK

Cotton prints. 76 × 91 inches.

Quilt is made of thirty blocks. Quilt is machine pieced and handquilted in black thread. Quilting stitches are inconsistently long in a shell quilting design. Quilt is self bound to face side.

10. 16 PATCH QUILT

Cotton prints. 71 × 82 inches.

Quilt is made up of twenty-five 11-inch blocks. Is machine pieced and handquilted. Quilt is self bound to face side. Sashing fabric and lining fabric are same but of a different color way. This quilt appears compatible with the T Block quilt.

11. CAESAR'S CROWN

Cottons in red, green, white and mottled yellow. 77 × 90 inches. Quilt is made up of forty-two 12-inch blocks. The absence of sashing between the blocks allows secondary shapes to be created by the way the blocks are joined together. Quilt has a separate binding. Quilt has areas where the quilting thread has pulled out; appears to lack knots.

12. DOUBLE WEDDING RING

Cottons. 80 × 102 inches.

Quilt features 30 rings. It is handpieced and handquilted. A bias binding has been added.

13. GRANDMOTHER'S FLOWER GARDEN #1

Cottons. 80 × 91 inches.

Quilt features 80 flower blocks with black centers. It is handpieced and handquilted. Scalloped edges have a separate bias binding sewn on by hand.

14. GRANDMOTHER'S FLOWER GARDEN #2

Cottons. 80 × 92 inches.

Quilt has 98 flowers with black centers. It is handpieced and handquilted. Quilt has an elaborate border. The black centers have faded on backing. Quilt features scalloped edges with a separate bias binding attached.

15. GRANDMOTHER'S FLOWER GARDEN #3

Cottons. 82 × 86 inches.

Quilt has 24 flowers made of 2-inch hexagons set three rings out from a yellow center. Flowers are set with a green path.

16. GRANDMOTHER'S FLOWER GARDEN #4

Cottons. 91 × 96 inches.

Quilt is made of 1½-inch hexagons. Handpieced and handquilted. Has a repetitious flower head with a white path.

17. SIX POINT STAR

Cottons. 85 × 95 inches.

Quilt is handpieced, made of 3-inch diamonds and hexagons. A quilted floral design is featured in center of hexagon. Scalloped edges have been bound with green bias binding.

18. DOUBLE WEDDING RING

Cottons. 78 × 96 inches.

Quilt has 25 rings that feature various dressmaker prints. Has been handpieced and handquilted. A separate binding has been attached along a scalloped border.

*The following women who lived at Cedar Heights could have contributed to the quilt collection.<sup>8</sup>*

Ms. Holmes' great-great grandmother: Louisa Sophia Cratin Thompson, was born on April 12, 1797, in Charles County, Maryland. She was married to Henry Bradford Thompson in Warren County, Georgia on October 26, 1813. She lived on the plantation in Russell County, Alabama, where she died on May 10, 1870.

Sarah Willis Richardson, daughter of Dr. William Richardson of Petersburg, Georgia, was born on October 24, 1821. She married George Hargraves Thompson on November 9, 1843, and lived at Cedar Heights. Family records indicate she was a first rate horticulturalist and was known throughout the countryside for her beautiful flowers and shrubs. She had two sons. She died October 1, 1891.

Ms. Holmes' great grandmother: Catherine Lucinda Long, was born at Uchee, Alabama on September 11, 1836. Her family was from Hatchechubbee, Alabama. She married Leonidas Sherrod Thompson, Sr., and they had seven children. Family records indicate after the Civil War, Leonidas Sherrod put his education to practical use by teaching school for much needed cash. He taught in private schools in the surrounding towns of Glennville, Eufaula and Villula. The communities could be reached by horseback from his plantation. After Catherine died on October 11, 1883, Leonidas lived with his oldest son in Hatchechubbee.

Ms. Holmes' grandmother: Caledonia Coleman Thompson, was born on July, 21, 1863, in Hatchechubbee, Alabama. She was married to Leonidas Sherrod Thompson, Jr. It was known she taught piano lessons and was a quiltmaker. She had three children and was only 33 years old when she had a heart attack and died on November 15, 1896.

Ms. Holmes' mother: Katie Belle Thompson Puryear, was born on June 25, 1893, in Hatchechubbee, Alabama. She was married to Henry Howell Puryear on November 25, 1909. Mrs. Puryear was an avid quiltmaker, who had talents in all types of needlework and china painting. She spent time working for charity and wrote poetry. On February 25, 1963, she died, leaving behind many patchwork quilts.

After viewing all the quilts, I was amazed when Ms. Holmes apologized for all the quilts being so similar. She asked if we had wasted our time coming to see them! There were still more of Mrs. Puryear's quilts in the attic that we did not view, but Ms. Holmes

assured us they were all alike. She recognized the different patchwork patterns when we pointed out specific design details of the Double Wedding Ring and Flower Garden quilts. Most likely Ms. Holmes will never quilt a stitch, but she now appreciates "those old quilts" as a part of her family's heritage.

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