

TO MR. AND MRS. H. D. WARNER  
WHO MADE THE  
FACULTY CLUB POSSIBLE

## **OUTLINE OF HISTORY OF UNIVERSITY CLUB BUILDING AND SITE**

<b>March 2, 1819</b>	<b>Site, part of land given to University of Alabama by United States Government. Sold by State of Alabama to J. S. Walker.</b>
<b>Date unknown</b>	<b>Sold by J. S. Walker to Hopson Owen.</b>
<b>January 1, 1834</b>	<b>Sold by Hopson Owen to James H. Dearing for \$550. House built very soon afterward at a cost of \$14,000.</b>
<b>March 7, 1836</b>	<b>Sold to Richard H. Lewis.</b>
<b>March 10, 1838</b>	<b>Sold to Governor Arthur P. Bagby for \$10,000. Occupied by him and his family during part of his two administrations, 1837-1841. The house was then given the name Governor's Mansion.</b>
<b>April 1, 1843</b>	<b>Sold to Benjamin Sykes.</b>
<b>1852</b>	<b>Sold to R. N. Harris</b>
<b>April 26, 1870</b>	<b>Deeded by Mr. Harris to his daughter, Mrs. H. M. Somerville.</b>
<b>April 30, 1900</b>	<b>Sold to Dr. J. L. Williamson by heirs of Mrs. Somerville.</b>
<b>May 1, 1922</b>	<b>Sold to Dr. S. E. Deal.</b>
<b>May 8, 1939</b>	<b>Sold to Dr. J. M. Forney.</b>
<b>April 1, 1944</b>	<b>Sold to the University of Alabama.</b>
<b>February 23, 1947</b>	<b>University Club opened.</b>

The opening of the new University Club has revived interest in the beautiful old mansion which houses it, and it has been thought that a brief account of the site, the builder and the subsequent owners would be of interest to club members.

It will be a surprise to many to learn that the site has returned after 128 years to the original owner. On March 2, 1819 the Congress of the United States deeded to the University of Alabama a tract of land on the north side of the Huntsville Road (now University Avenue) extending as far west as the present Queen City Avenue. The University was, of course, not yet in existence but was provided for in the constitution of the newly admitted state.

The State of Alabama (date unknown) deeded seven acres more or less, extending from the gully east of Pinehurst to Queen City Avenue and from University Avenue to 4<sup>th</sup> Street, to one, J. S. Walker. Very little information has been obtained about J. S. Walker, His name appears on a number of early Tuscaloosa deeds. He bought and sold real estate and at one time owned the lot now occupied by the Alabama Power Company.<sup>1</sup>

Walker in turn deeded the tract to Hopson Owen. Laura Owen, the daughter of Hopson Owen, married James Thomas Murfee, a native of Virginia and graduate of V.M.I., who was professor of mathematics at the University of Alabama from 1860 to 1862 and from 1862 to 1865 was commandant of the cadets of the University with the rank of Colonel in the Alabama troops. He was architect and rebuilder of the University of

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. G. W. Gandrud kindly furnished me a number of records from Autauga County from the dates and real estate transactions. The J. C. Walker there mentioned seems to be the same man. If so his family came from South Carolina.

Alabama and his plan for Woods Hall was adopted June, 1866 according to Clark's History of Education in Alabama, 1702-1889, page 95. Colonel Murfee was subsequently president of Howard College then located at Marion, Alabama, and founder and principal of Marion Military Institute, which he housed in the buildings discarded by Howard when it was moved to Birmingham.

Mr. Owen, on January 1, 1834, sold the land to James Hunter Dearing for \$550.00. In this deed the present Queen City Avenue is described as the east margin of the town of Tuscaloosa.

Captain James H. Dearing was born in Rockingham County, North Carolina, in 1787. He was a Captain in the Army of the United States in the War of 1812 and at one time was in command of Fort Moultrie near Charleston, South Carolina. When peace was concluded he resigned his commission and began a very remarkable business career.

Just at Christmas time of 1816 (or 1817) he came to Tuscaloosa on an exploring trip with the idea of settling in Alabama. He stopped at a tavern kept by Joshua Holbert.<sup>2</sup> On Christmas Day to the great delight of the other guests he made the first egg-nog ever consumed in the little settlement.

After this first trip to Alabama he returned to North Carolina to purchase a cargo of tobacco which he sold in Mobile and St. Stevens. Taking the profits of this venture he went to New York, purchased a stock of goods, and returned to open a store in St. Stevens.

Soon after this he built a steamboat at Blakely at the head of Mobile Bay. He named his boat the Tom Bigbee and, embarking with his family and a stock of goods, he returned to Tuscaloosa as a permanent settler. His boat

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<sup>2</sup> See Reminiscences of a Long Life by William R. Smith, Vol. I, p. 15.

is said to have been the second to come up the river to the settlement. His career in Tuscaloosa was a very important part of the early history of the town. He was an active and successful merchant, was a steam- boat owner and operator, and built several brick stores on what is now Broad Street. He bought and operated a plantation. He is said to have been the first in this part of the country to plant clover. He was a leader in founding in 1830 the Alabama Female Institute which was later known as Stafford School.

In 1819 Captain Dearing had married in Chapel Hill, North Carolina a Miss Julia Searcy, an older sister of Reuben Searcy who was in later years to be a well beloved physician and honored citizen of Tuscaloosa. He brought his bride from Chapel Hill to St. Stephens by private carriage. It required four weeks to make the trip.<sup>3</sup>

It was in 1834 that Captain Dearing built for his wife, at a cost of \$14,000, the house now occupied by the Club. The builder, Mr. John Johnson Webster, a relative of Colonel Woolsey Finnell, also built the Cochrane Home formerly on the campus of Stillman College, the Marr Home now the home of Mrs. James Jefferson Mayfield, and the old Court House on the southwest corner of 6<sup>th</sup> Street and Greensboro Avenue where the Alston building now stands. The house had the same general appearance that it has today but there was no sun porch on the south side, and in the center of the roof was a square platform surrounded by a wooden railing and a similar wooden railing extended all around the roof just at the eaves.

From the platform on the roof, the Dearings and the families who followed them used to watch for the smoke of an expected steamboat

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<sup>3</sup> See Reminiscences of a Long Life, by William R. Smith, Vol. I., p. 100.

bringing nearly all the luxuries and many necessities from Mobile. The Christmas steamer was watched for with special eagerness.

The east wing of the house was much longer than at present and had only one story. The kitchen, now the garage, stood on the north side quite separated from the house but connected by a covered way to the large north porch. On the south side of the east wing was another porch with pillars similar to the ones in front but much shorter. The balcony over the front door was much larger than the present one and extended to the pillars. The glass in the side lights and fan was purplish orange.

The stables stood just back of the present Bettis home and what is now Pinehurst was called the calf pasture. There was a large poultry yard and house near the stables and a well in the back yard. A row of four one-story brick rooms housed the servants.

Captain Dearing was a great lover of flowers and his rose garden ran north of the house as far as Fourth Street. It was laid off in beds with graveled walks between. East of the roses was vegetable garden and behind that an orchard. In front and on the south side were flowering shrubs, bulbs and annuals. An ornamental wooden fence painted white enclosed the house and gardens.

Captain Dearing lived only two years in the home which he had planned with so much pleasure. The students from the newly established University helped themselves to his poultry and fruit and trampled his cherished flowers. In disgust he sold the place, bought a larger tract of land just north of Dearing Place, built a second home at the southwest corner of

13<sup>th</sup> Street and 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue,<sup>4</sup> and laid out even more elaborate flower gardens and orchards which he enjoyed undisturbed until his death in 1861.<sup>5</sup>

Just to the west of him his brother, Alexander Dearing, who came to Tuscaloosa some years later than he, built the beautiful home now occupied by the Swaim family. This home, after the death of Mr. Dearing, was inherited by his daughter, Melissa, who married Dr. William Stokes Wyman. The Wyman family lived in the house until they moved to the University Campus. After the Wymans the place was the home of Major and Mrs. James Spence and is now owned by Mr. S. G. Swaim.

From 1836 to 1838 the Club was owned by Richard H. Lewis who owned a plantation just west of Newberne, Alabama. Richard Henry Lewis, born in North Carolina, was a planter from Greensboro. He intended to make the mansion his home but for some unknown reason changed his mind and moved to the Hermitage Plantation, in what is now Hale County, some miles west of Newberne. He is related to the DeVane Jones family and one of his granddaughters, Mrs. Annie Lewis Jones, was for some years a sorority housemother at the University.

Mr. Lewis sold this home to Governor Arthur P. Bagby. It was his occupancy, during his two terms as Governor, 1837-1841, which gave the name, "Governor's Mansion," by which the place has been most often called. No other governor ever lived in the house nor was it ever owned by the State; it was private property.

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<sup>4</sup> The spot where his house stood is occupied by the home of Mrs. Oscar Dahlene.

<sup>5</sup> After his death his daughter, Susan Dearing, and her husband, Captain A. P. Bozeman, lived in this home and later Mr. and Mrs. Adrian S. Van de Graaf.

The life of Governor Bagby was as bold and adventurous as that of Captain Dearing. Born in Louisa County, Virginia in 1794, son of Captain James Bagby, fourth in descent from James Bagby, a Scotchman who settled near Jamestown in 1628,<sup>6</sup> he entered Alabama on foot with all his worldly possessions tied up in one small bundle. He settled in Claiborne, then a very important town in Alabama, became a lawyer, was a member of the Legislature, Governor, United States Senator, and Minister to Russia. He died of yellow fever in Mobile in 1858.<sup>7</sup> He is described as a man of great strength and vigor both of mind and body with great charm of manner. His inauguration in 1837 was said to have been the first such ceremony to draw large crowds. Unfortunately very few details of his life in the old mansion have been available.

Mrs. Sarah Ann Gayle, wife of Governor Gayle (governor 1831-1835) gives in her journal three glimpses of Governor Bagby. The two families had been intimate friends but politics had separated them and these references quoted below are not friendly:<sup>8</sup>

“September 17, 1828. [Apropos of an acquaintance begun without formal introduction.] I have led the way to several pleasing acquaintances in the same manner; Mrs. Emily Steel Bagby was one and with her I enjoyed many years of uninterrupted friendship. She was indeed a woman of unpretending excellence, modest, domestic, and devoted to her husband. I

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<sup>6</sup> Dictionary of American Biography, p. 491.

<sup>7</sup> See Makers and Romance of Alabama History by B. F. Riley, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Journal of Mrs. Sarah Ann Gayle, wife of Governor John Gayle, governor 1831-1835.

could weep with childhood's weakness to remember how we once were, and how changed now.

"November 10, 1828. Mr. Bagby is married to Miss Elizabeth Connall of Claiborne. His wife (Emily) little thought that the blue-eyed child we used to see would in time fill her place in the heart and arms of her husband.

"March 20, 1829. Mr. Gayle has returned in safety from a trip below. The gentleman [presumably Bagby] was polite and well armed, wearing his enormous pistol sticking from his overcoat pocket behind covered by a hand-kerchief."

A letter from John Gayle, member of the Legislature in Tuscaloosa, to his wife in Greensboro, dated July 8, 1829, gives an interesting description of Governor Bagby's appearance. "A great many lawyers are here from all quarters, among the rest Bagby. He made his appearance in court in a style far exceeding anything you ever saw of him or any, silk from top to bottom. His coat is a broad black striped shining silk, a frock too, which dazzles the eye."

It would be beyond the scope of this narrative to attempt to relate all the important events of Governor Bagby's administration or to trace his exact influence in them. Among these events were the final determination of the boundaries of Alabama, and the abolition of imprisonment for debt in Alabama. "In a series of able state papers he urged readjustment and reform in the financial system of Alabama,<sup>9</sup> secured the establishment of chancery courts, forced the creation of a penitentiary system, advocated improvement

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<sup>9</sup> See page 191, Vol. 1 of History of Alabama, A. B. Moore.

of river navigation, a good system of public schools and the support of higher education.”<sup>10</sup>

In a message of Governor Bagby to the Legislature he said:

It is idle for us to be clinging to the forms of the Constitution while its substance is daily yielding to the rude tide of innovation and fanaticism which is constantly lashing against it. And if that instrument shall fail to secure to us the great essential objects contemplated by its illustrious founders, it becomes our duty, not only as patriots but as rational beings. . . to provide new guards for our future security.<sup>11</sup>

During the administration of Governor Bagby profits from the State Bank paid the expenses of State Government.<sup>12</sup> “From 1836 to 1842 there were no taxes to pay, for the banks supplied the funds necessary for running the government of the State.”<sup>13</sup> “The banks did a flourishing business and appeared to be very prosperous. They were so prosperous that the legislature felt justified in abolishing direct taxes and allowing the banks to pay the running expenses of the government.”<sup>14</sup>

Governor Bagby, in October 1839, laid the cornerstone of the penitentiary building constructed in Wetumpka.

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<sup>10</sup> See Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. I, p. 491.

<sup>11</sup> A. B. Moore, History of Alabama, p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> William Garrott Brown, History of Alabama, p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Campbell DuBose, Alabama History, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> A. B. Moore, History of Alabama, p. 222.

His last public service to the state was on a commission with Judge J. J. Ormond and Ex-governor C. C. Clay to codify the laws of Alabama.

On January 2, 1839 Governor Bagby speaking before both houses of the Legislature said, "Of all the evils that beset and way lay the path of civilized society I am satisfied that intemperance is the greatest. And if the Legislature possessed the legitimate power to suppress this evil, without the infraction of private rights I should rejoice to see it exercised."

In June, 1837 as president of the University, Alva Woods made his retiring speech and then the robe of office was lifted from his shoulders and transferred to those of the Reverend Basil Manly who was brought forward and formally presented to Governor Bagby. The Governor handed to him a large bunch of University keys saying that he invested him with control of the premises and the dignity of the office of the President of the University of Alabama.

The two eldest children of Governor Bagby, Mary and Adelaide, were pupils in 1839 in the Alabama Female Atheneum. This school stood in Druid Court and was later called Tuscaloosa Female College and popularly Tuscaloosa Methodist College. The president of its board of trustees was the Reverend J. H. DeVotie, father of Noble Leslie DeVotie, founder of the S.A.E. Fraternity. The Alabama Room in the University Library has a copy of the Catalogue for 1839 of the Antheneum. Mary Bagby was then in the Preparatory Department, Second Division or Geography Class; Adelaide was in the First Division or Elementary Department.

A great-grandson of Governor Bagby's, Dr. Richard Pendleton Bagby, is now in partnership with Dr. Brown Farrison, a great nephew of Mrs. James H. Dearing (Julia Searcy).

In 1843 the Mansion was bought by the Reverend Benjamin Sykes, one of twin brothers both of whom were Methodist preachers. On a visit to his plantation at a meeting in a nearby Methodist church the Reverend Sykes was asked to lead in a prayer for rain. While he was praying there came a bright flash of lightening and a loud clap of thunder. He paused, opened his eyes and said to one of the stewards: "Brother Jones please look out the window and see if that cloud is over my plantation." It was.

He died in Tuscaloosa and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery. The family soon sold the house and returned to Mississippi.

In 1852 the mansion was bought by R. N. Harris, a planter from Hale County who wished to educate his children in Tuscaloosa. He and his children and grand- children lived in the house for half a century. He, like Captain Dearing, was a lover of flowers and cultivated them successfully in the large grounds.

On the edge of the front porch, one on each side, Mr. Harris placed two large lead dogs painted white which were the delight of succeeding generations of children until the place was bought by Dr. J. L. Williamson. The dogs were taken to Memphis by Dr. W. G. Somerville; one is now in front of the home of Miss Lisa Somerville, 23 Patton Place, The Highlands.

Two events of his stay have been remembered. In August, 1862, a body of Confederate soldiers marched past the house and Mr. Harris who had three sons else- where in the Army ordered the servants to draw buckets of cool water from the well and to gather all the ripe figs to offer to the hot and tired men. His two daughters and two of their cousins stood on the porch to watch the troops go by. When a group of officers appeared the young ladies waved a greeting and to their modest dismay the officers at once

dismounted and came toward the house. The girls ran inside but were met by their aunt who bade them go back, receive the officers as well-bred young ladies should, and offer them refreshments. The officers lingered a short while then rode on to join their men. The young daughter of Mr. Harris was given to writing poetry and that night she sat down and composed some lines to the officer she liked best. They began,

“We met but once – one short yet blissful meeting, and ended,

“We met but once – and shall we meet no more?”. . . . .

“My fond heart answers, When this war is o’er.

“Till then I’ll ever live in hope.”

The author of these sentimental lines was later married in the parlor of the old mansion but not to the handsome young officer who had inspired her verses.

Three years later another body of troops appeared, the ones who had just defeated the University Cadets in a skirmish at the river bridge. These troops camped in a large open square across the street, later called The Park, belonging to Professor Hill’s Tuscaloosa Female College, where his carefully guarded girls were wont to promenade behind a high fence while University students walked round and round outside.

These troops took Mr. Harris’ carriage horses and ordered the servants to cook meals for the officers but did not disturb the family in any way. Only one man, a wounded officer, came to the front door to ask for linen to make fresh bandages for his wounds. The ladies of the family supplied the linen and dressed the wounds. The next day the smoke of the burning University buildings could be plainly seen from the house.

A rumor came that a large body of Confederate troops was marching on Tuscaloosa from the east. The Union forces threw up earth works on the University grounds just east of the Observatory and for a short while it seemed that the University Campus might become a battle field. The rumor proved to be untrue and the Union forces marched off toward Selma.

On the death of Mr. Harris, the place was inherited by his elder daughter, Mrs. Henderson Somerville, wife of the head of the University Law School, and as was his son, the late Ormond Somerville, a judge of the Supreme Court of Alabama.

The Somervilles owned the place until 1900 when they sold it to Dr. James L. Williamson, one of Tuscaloosa's most skillful and loved physicians. One of his daughters, Mrs. H. L. (Mary Alice) Vail, lived for years on a lot taken from the east edge of the property. On May 1, 1922 the widow of Dr. Williamson conveyed the house and the present lot to Dr. S. E. Deal.

Dr. and Mrs. Deal repaired the house and made some important changes. The east wing was shortened and a second story added to it and the south porch with its columns was removed. The sun-room with the steps leading to it was added. The colored glass in the fanlight and side lights at the front door was replaced by clear glass. The stucco work in the center of the parlor ceiling was taken down, repaired by an expert, and put back in place. The other stucco work could not be saved and was replaced by a similar design.

The old kitchen was made into a garage and the brick wall built to separate back and side yard. The inside of the east wing was planned as it exists today. A stair which led from the upper front hall to the attic was

removed and the stairs in the lower front hall were moved forward a little but the old solid mahogany rail was preserved.

After the death of Dr. Deal his widow sold the house to Dr. J. M. Forney who used it as an office and planned to establish a clinic but the outbreak of war and his entry into the Navy Medical Corps made this impossible.

During the period of his Army service the house was occupied for several months by a group of girls, belonging to the National Youth Administration, who were studying airplane electronics at the University.

On September 1, 1943, the Tuscaloosa Service Center was moved from 1922 Broad Street, where it had been operating under the capable direction of Mrs. Burton Morley since January 1, 1943, to the "Governor's Mansion." A total of over 80,000 men and women of the Armed Services of the United States were welcomed, entertained, counseled, comforted and given a home away from home by this service center, at its first location on Broad Street and the one in the Mansion.

The period of the Service Center, September 1, 1943–September 1, 1945, was the most important and most interesting in the history of the old mansion. Mrs. Morley gave herself with wholehearted devotion to the management of a program of amusement and helpfulness for the men and women of the Armed Services. The best tribute to the woman and her work was paid in an account written by T/Sgt. Barrie Stavis, a patient in Northington Hospital. This statement will be found in the Appendix. Part of it was published in Colliers, September 8, 1945. Mrs. Morley was assisted in her work by seventy young women who served in shifts as junior hostesses. A list of their names will also be found in the Appendix.

The University had bought the building from Dr. Forney on April 1, 1944. In August, 1945, Dr. Paty notified the Service Center that it would be necessary to use the building to house University coeds for whom there was no room in the dormitories and asked for possession of the premises on September 1<sup>st</sup>. Thus ended one of the most useful and interesting periods in the history of the Club building.

Colliers in its issue of September 8, 1945 gave the highest praise to the Service Center, to Mrs. Morley and to her trained assistants for their work with French and American cadets training at Van DeGraff airport, men from Army Specialized Training Program at the University and, of course, any member of the Armed Services passing through Tuscaloosa.

After these healthy trainees left Tuscaloosa the Center took the delicate and important task of helping the wounded at Northington to regain their morale and to take part once more in normal social activities.

On September 1, 1945 the Mansion was returned to the University and for a period of six months 75 coeds for whom there was no room in the dormitories, were housed in it with Mrs. Henrietta Cowan, now House Director of Wilson Hall, as chaperone. They found living in the Mansion some consolation for the long walks to and from the University and when there was room for them to be moved to Powers Hall a number signed a petition to be allowed to finish out the year in the Mansion.

When Dr. Forney decided not to return to Tuscaloosa to live he wished to sell the property. The University had no funds available to buy it, but when Dr. Raymond Paty heard that it was about to be sold for business use he went to Mr. and Mrs. H. D. Warner who had helped so many good causes in Tuscaloosa and asked them to help him raise money to buy the

place for a University Club. They offered at once to give the necessary amount. In addition, they gave large sums for redecorating and for furniture and Mrs. Warner worked diligently with her own hands to get the house ready and was still at work when the first guests arrived for the opening reception. Mr. and Mrs. Warner have lately given to the University the Harwood home next door.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to note how close the connection has been between the University and the owners of this property. Sons and daughters, grandchildren and many lateral connections have been graduates, instructors, librarians, trustees, quarter masters, surgeons, and president.

Under the efficient direction of Mrs. Aline Van Dusor the University Club is today playing a very important part in the life of the University, the Alumni and the Tuscaloosa members.

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<sup>15</sup> The Warner gifts have been made through the David Warner Foundation established to preserve the memory of the Warner's elder son.