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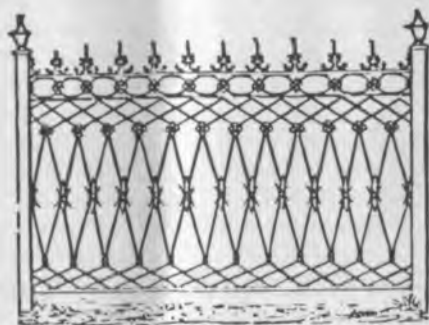


EDITOR'S NOTE. Mainly because of a dearth of articles for the QUARTERLY, I have decided to reprint several of my articles originally appearing in the Huntsville TIMES that were included in my booklet, "Sketches of The Tennessee Valley In Antebellum Days: People, Places, Things." I hope that we will develop greater interest in the Foundation and in the QUARTERLY in the future. Possibly the Essay Contest will generate some articles. H.S. Marks.



Architect George Steele —

*He Designed, Built
City's Early Edifices*





A GEORGE STEELE 1835 DESIGN:

HUNTSVILLE'S FIRST ALABAMA BANK BUILDING

For a man who became the most important architect in Huntsville during ante-bellum days, relatively little is known about George Gilliam Steele.

Steele's legacy to Huntsville and the Tennessee Valley are the buildings he designed and built that play a prominent role in the architectural history of Huntsville.

Born in Virginia in the late 1790s, he came to Alabama in his youth and settled in Huntsville. He was accompanied here by William Brandon, who later collaborated with him on many architectural projects.

Evidently almost immediately upon arriving in Huntsville, Steele established a building and architectural firm. He constructed brick kilns which furnished a considerable portion of the brick used in the construction of his buildings, and he later operated a cotton mill in the city.

By far the most important commercial building designed and built by Steele is the First Alabama Bank of Huntsville, formerly the First National Bank, erected on the Courthouse Square in 1835.

In February of that year the first meeting of the president and directors of the state's newest branch bank was held in Huntsville, an organizational meeting that led to the selection of Steele as the builder of the bank's new quarters. In October the committee for the erection of the building advertised in a local newspaper that the "building is to be 53 feet in width and 77 feet in length, with a plain Ionic portico at one end, which with two fronts including the cornice will be of polished stone, the remainder of brick."

Like most of Steele's commercial buildings, it is a classic revival structure with a six-column Ionic portico and high

entablature. Materials used in the structure are both imported and local: Stone slabs from local quarries were used for the foundation; the columns, capitals and shafts were made in Baltimore and shipped to Huntsville via river, canal and ox cart.

The entrance doors are almost 15 feet high and were originally hung on hinges. The window construction would be considered unusual today, for their shutters are double-hinged and fold into compartments on each side. Also unusual because of its high cost is the use of copper to cover the roof.

The total cost of building topped \$76,000, a considerable sum for the day.

Steele also designed the second Madison County Courthouse, which stood from 1840 until 1914. Like his bank building, it was a classic revival structure, also with six-columned Ionic porticoes.

The commissioner's court, predecessor of the Madison County Commission, had asked Steele, in association with Thomas and William Brandon, to submit plans for the design of a new courthouse. On Aug. 29, 1835, the court adopted the plans drawn by Steele.

It was not until April, 1838, that Steele was appointed superintendent of the courthouse construction. He was to be paid \$1,500 for his services, provided the building was completed by Jan. 1, 1840. It was not finished by this date, so Steele was paid an additional \$500. The structure was finally completed early in 1842.

It was a two-story building of stone and brick, with a full basement and a dome. In 1839 the commissioner's court voted to cover the dome with copper. This metal, purchased in Baltimore, cost the county almost \$4,000 more.

Steele, who died in 1855 at the age of 56 and was buried in Maple Hill Cemetery, designed many homes in the Huntsville area, but of all of them "Oaks Place" was evidently his favorite. About 1840 he designed and built a home that reflected his personal tastes and needs. When



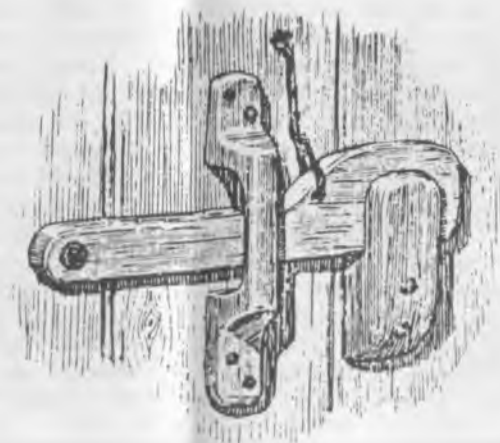
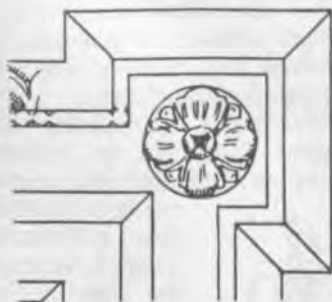
constructed it lay east of Huntsville, between the town and Monte Sano.

The main house was surrounded by all the accoutrements of a plantation. It consisted of 11 rooms, unusual in that a large, 28 by 30-foot bedroom on the second floor was designed to be a young man's dormitory. This room was segregated from the rest of the house, as were the quarters for the women. This was to eliminate any cause for scandal when lavish entertainments were provided by the Steeles.

Steele and his wife were famed for their social gatherings. Their most noted assembly occurred when James K. Polk was elected president of the United States in 1844. In celebration a prized ox was barbecued, along with numerous lambs and hogs, and a cake baked in Nashville was carried by one of the Steele wagons to the plantation.

Every male attending the feast and party was given a souvenir cane, most of them made from hickory gathered from Monte Sano and some capped with silver for the more prominent guests.

Such extravaganzas, while unusual, reflect the economic development and prominence of Huntsville in Alabama and the South during the ante-bellum period.



Early

Huntsville

Female

College

Was

Community-Backed

Project



Portrait of Madame J. Hamilton Childs

The modern notion that women did not receive much formal education in the antebellum South is contradicted by the history of the Huntsville Female College.

For many years, leaders in the area wanted to establish a college for females. Finally in 1845, Madame J. Hamilton Childs established the Bascom Female Institution in Huntsville. Madame Childs, later to be very identified with Athens State College, began operating in the Masonic Temple. However, her school was not regarded by many of the concerned of Huntsville as an institution of learning, or, as was known then, one "of high grade for the education of girls and young ladies."

Around 1850, a group of citizens met with the Rev. Edward Slater of the Methodist Church and his successor Robert Young. A committee, composed of "men of wealth," was formed and supported by the church. Final plans were made in February, 1851, for the establishment of the college. The Methodist Church was then the largest denomination in the city and claimed the largest membership in North Alabama. With such a large and influential organization backing them, members of the committee decided to raise \$10,000 to create the college. So confident were they of reaching their goal, they passed a resolution declaring the institution would begin classes on the first Monday of the following September, which was only seven months away. By May, subscriptions had reached \$9,000. Next, the problem of finding quarters until a permanent structure could be erected. The committee turned to Madame Childs, who was operating her school in the Masonic Temple. She was hired as assistant principal, and her students became the nucleus of the new school. In August, permission was granted to the Methodist Church to occupy the same rooms in the temple.

A charter for "The Bascom Female Institute" was obtained from the Alabama Legislature in January, 1852. The name of the school was changed to the "Huntsville Female College" in December, 1855, when the legislature amended the charter.

By this time the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Church had accepted responsibility of the guidance and operation of the institution and permanent quarters had been erected on Randolph Avenue, three blocks east of the court-house square.

The cornerstone of the new building was laid in June, 1853. The structure was three stories high and of Greek Revival style. Constructed of brick, it featured four large Ionic columns on the front and measured 164 feet wide and 52 feet in depth. A very large building, it contained rooms for 100 boarding students and had servants' quarters, classrooms, a dining room, drawing room and a chapel. Later, a fourth story was added on for more dormitory space.

The school was well accepted by the people of Huntsville and the Tennessee Valley. Very quickly it earned a regional reputation, and by 1859 the enrollment totaled 184, with 70 boarders from six southern states.

Student life was spartan compared to the present. The school's motto "Good Success" was to be achieved through hard work and proper respect for elders. A demerit system was used in grading, and at one time each demerit cost a half point in grades. If a student received twenty, she was dismissed from the college.

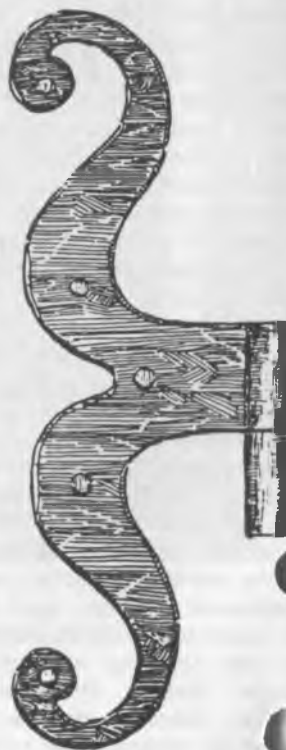
Attire was strictly regulated. Uniform dress was required in both summer and winter, and no ostentatious use of jewelry or other ornamentation was allowed.

Instructors at the college were just as strictly regulated. Many of the college catalogs carried a list of "Duties of Teachers." A typical list prohibited instructors from leaving Huntsville without the permission of the highest authority. Faculty members were prohibited from

giving instruction of any kind beyond the college, whether paid or not. Teachers were to be impartial, yet fair. They could not receive calls during school hours and had to make sure their pupils tended to their studies, obeyed the rules and regulations and were in their dormitories when they were supposed to be.

Following the list of dos and don'ts prospective teachers were informed that if they could not abide by the rules, they should not seek employment.

Huntsville Female College continued to operate until the Civil War. During the conflict, classes were suspended. They were resumed by the early 1870s. In 1888, the college was sold at public auction, because the church could no longer support its operation. Finally, the main building caught fire on the night of Jan. 8, 1895. The Huntsville Mercury announced in its next edition that "the once proud alma mater of thousands of Southern matrons and maidens (was) a pile of smouldering ruins." The college was moved to Gadsden. Half a century of service was ended in Huntsville.



Green^e Academy

**Was Vital to
Development
of the Area**

Just a few years after Huntsville was founded, while Alabama was still part of the Mississippi Territory, leaders of the community and the surrounding area began to plan for the education of the children here.



The territorial legislature passed an act on Nov. 25, 1812, declaring that "there shall be established in Madison County, an academy, which shall bear the name of Green Academy." But no money was provided for the academy; the trustees were merely empowered to raise money for the institution by lottery. In December, 1816, the legislature granted \$500 to the academy, but this was not nearly enough.

Finally, in November, 1818, the legislature of the territory (by this time Mississippi had already achieved statehood and the remaining area had become the territory of Alabama) provided for the fiscal independence of the academy. An act was passed providing for the sale of a number of shares in the Planters' and Merchants' Bank of Huntsville, the profits from the sale to be divided among the old stockholders of the academy, and the rest granted to the academy. This raised almost \$2,000 for the school, and additional funds were sought from the community for the construction of a campus.

General John Brahan donated land for the campus, and buildings were erected by 1823. At the time the site was about a quarter of a mile east of Huntsville, located in a grove of trees. When the city limits were extended, it became the northeast corner at the intersection of East Clinton and Calhoun streets.

Green Academy was the second chartered academy in the Alabama Territory. It was considered by many as the most important educational institution in the

territory and later in the state, until the University of Alabama opened its doors to students in 1831. The Huntsville Democrat, in its Aug. 22, 1828, issue, stated of the academy that "there is not Seminary of its kind . . . west of the Alleghany mountains."

The academy was not considered at the time an institution of primary training. The Democrat stated in its Jan. 4, 1825, issue that it "was intended to occupy a station superior to that of the Elemental English school, to be a place of instruction for boys, who have passed the mere rudiments of English learning; and for young gentlemen."

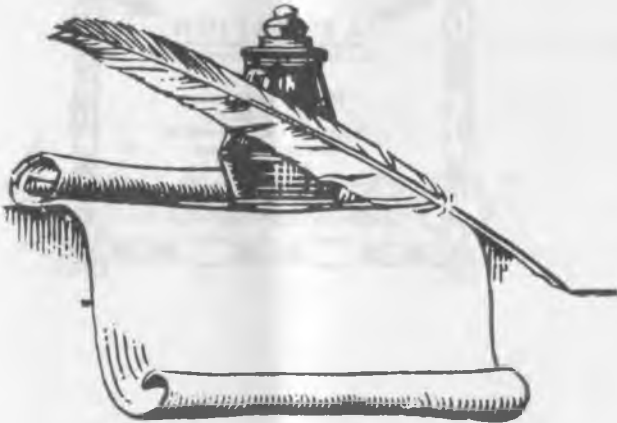
In 1825 the tuition fee was \$25, payable quarterly in equal installments. This seems so little to us today, yet in ante-bellum days this was a large sum of money, and only the more affluent families could send their young men to the institution. This may explain why enrollment never was very high. The Southern Advocate proclaimed in August, 1828, that nearly 50 students were enrolled, "with every prospect of (enrollment) becoming much larger."

The academic success of the institution can be seen in the many graduates who went on to distinction in Alabama. For example, the student roster in 1828 included such well known ante-bellum family names in Huntsville as Birney, Chambers, Clay, Clemens, Mastin and Veitch. Clement Clairborne Clay, for instance, son of the eighth governor of Alabama, was a student at the academy in the late 1820s, and would later serve his state as a senator, in both the Federal and Confederate senates.

The grading system used by the institution shortly before the Civil War was basically the same used in our public schools now: 100 was excellent, "The Highest Degree of Merit 90 was very good; 80 good; 70 "Tolerable 60 unsatisfactory and 50 "Deficient."

Green Academy continued to operate until its buildings were burned by Federal troops during the Civil War. Later the institution became a part of the public

school system of Huntsville. Today the East Clinton Grammar School is located on the site. In all, Green Academy operated for half a century and was vital to the development of Huntsville and the Tennessee Valley during the ante bellum period.





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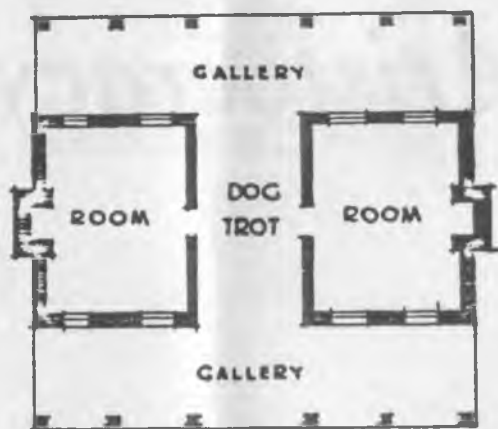
Early Athens:

Log Cabin

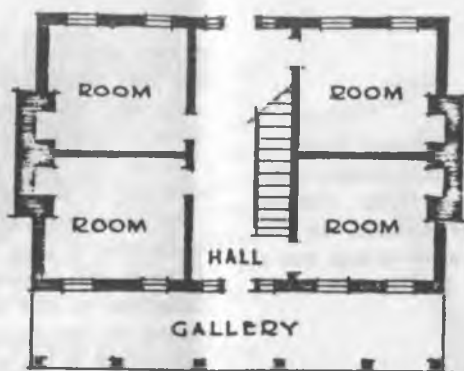
Aristocracy



CABIN



DOG-TROT HOUSE



Frontier life in the Tennessee Valley in the early 1800s was for most people a life of drudgery and hard times. Formal education was for the affluent. In the beginning a home not made of logs was a rarity which only the wealthy few could afford.

Why log cabins?

Squatter's rights did not exist then. Nor was staying on land for free and having the right to buy it first if it came to sale — known as preemption — allowed. So if a settler stayed on land he had not legally acquired, he was regarded merely as an interloper and had to move when the land was acquired by others. And any habitation he had constructed would be lost.

So logs had to do then, for a number of reasons: availability, simplicity of construction, ruggedness, and cheapness.

Thus, most of the original settlers of Athens, in Limestone County, are referred to as the "log cabin aristocracy." Almost all these pioneers, regardless of how much money or prestige they or their families were later to acquire, were born or raised in log cabins. These cabins were constructed quickly: There are pioneer recollections of sturdy ones being constructed within a week — including window frames and floors.

There were no sawmills in the area, so the logs were merely trimmed. Generally they were not notched (this process came later in North Alabama and Tennessee).

Most houses were of only one story. When a pioneer wrote a series of articles about early life in Athens for the Athens Post in 1876, he was always careful to note if a structure was two stories.

Double log construction — the type used commonly in this area — was the erection



of two structures, usually consisting of only one room, connected by a covered breezeway. The breezeway was used as a center of family activity in good weather, a haven in bad weather for animals belonging to the family.

Public buildings of early Athens were all constructed of logs.

Athens was chosen the county seat of Limestone in 1819 by five commissioners elected by the people of the county and empowered by the legislature to select the site.

The first courthouse was completed in 1820, probably constructed of the same logs that were cut from the land on which the building was erected. It was of two floors, with chimneys at both ends. The front side had an entrance and windows, four on each floor.

It was a typical log structure, plain in all respects. No fancy door, no shutters for the windows.

In 1825 it was torn down and replaced by a brick structure. But this was poorly constructed, began to fall apart, and was torn down in 1834. A third courthouse was constructed in 1834-35, and stood until it was burned during the Civil War.

The first schoolhouse in Athens was also constructed of logs. It had no glass in the windows, leaving the students and the teachers subject to the whims of the weather.

Entertainment in early Athens was enjoyed in the open air near the Big Springs (early towns invariably developed by water resources) or in log structures that served as "the" theater and "the" tavern. The theater occasionally attracted traveling performers. Edwin Forrest, famous actor of that period, performed this crude structure.

The tavern was one of Athens' original structures, constructed in 1808 on the south side of what became the courthouse square. It was known far and wide, evidently for a number of reasons. A bell, supposedly capped with silver, gave it the name of Bell Tavern. When rung it could

be heard for miles around.

Taverns in those days provided not only food, drinks and entertainment, but lodging as well. The Athenian describing the early life of his town in the Post in 1876 may have been an abstainer or opposed to the tavern's operation for other reasons, for he stated that "many a poor unsuspecting fly lost its wings and legs by walking into the parlor of the vile old spider."

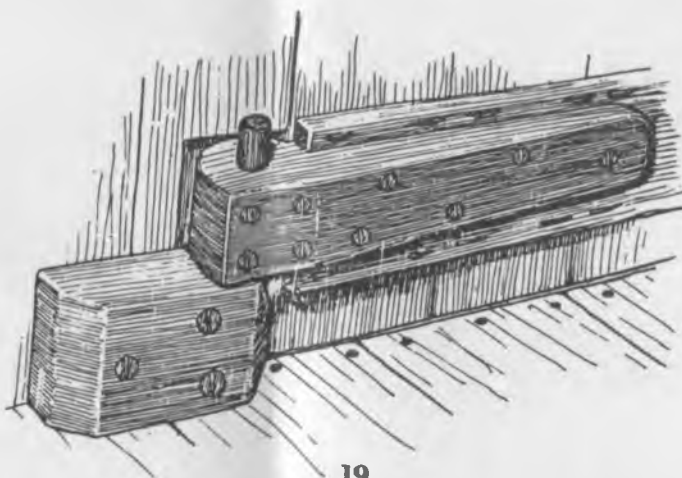
Those getting in trouble, in the tavern or elsewhere, sometimes wound up in the jail. It was quite a busy place, for debtors were placed in jail during those days to work out their debts.

The Athens jail structure was divided into two compartments. One was called the "Debtor's Room," the other, less comfortable, the "Dungeon."

Sentences in those days often included hours in the pillory, which was used in Athens until 1840, and 39 lashes on the bare back. Our Athens Post correspondent wrote a hundred years ago that he had seen blood and flesh of men "fly from their backs under the cruel lash."

Students were frequently whipped. The correspondent noted that an early teacher "flogged without regard to age, size or previous condition."

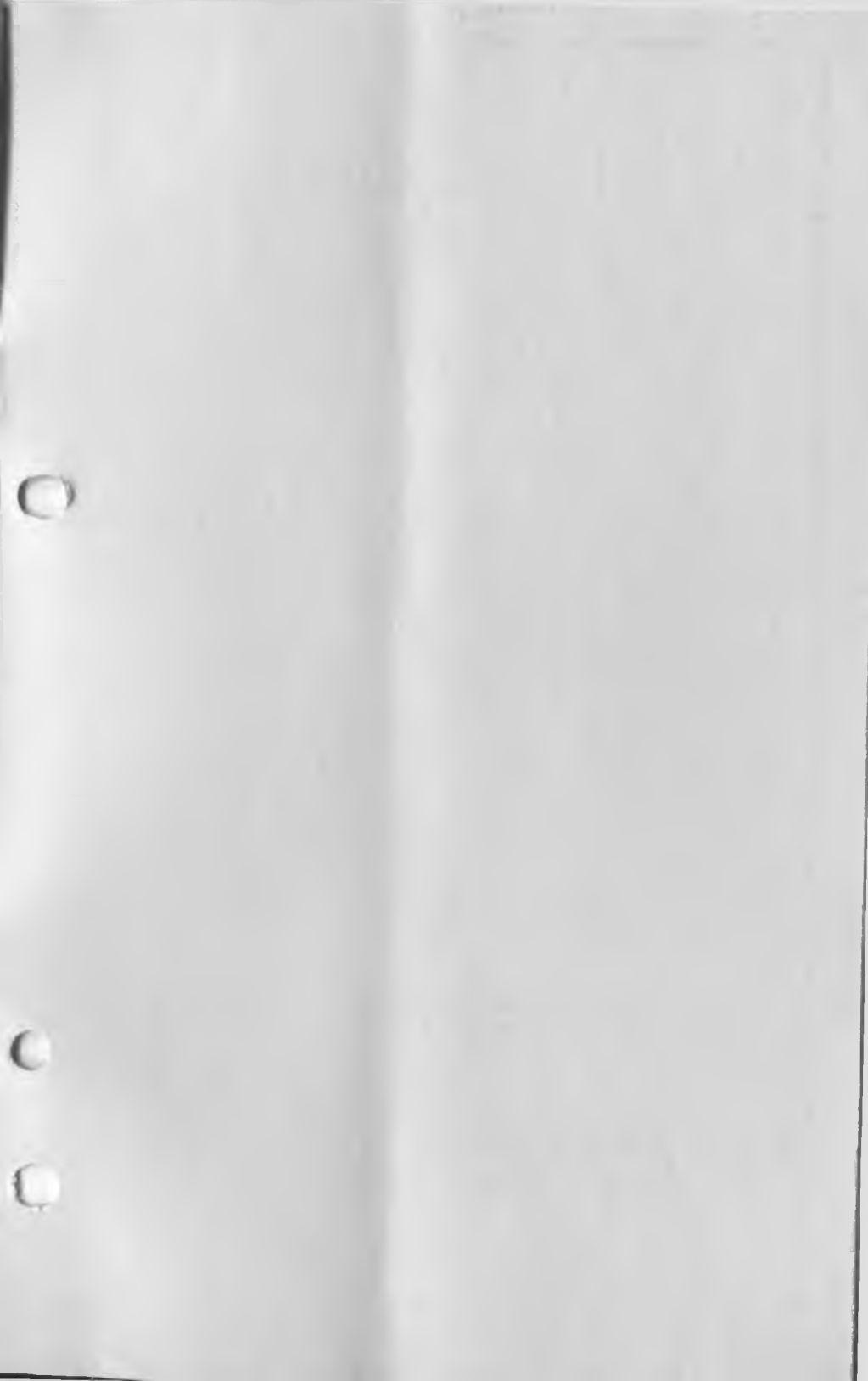
Frontier life? Hardly the good old days we like to imagine, but a hard life with few material comforts.





Have any Experiences to share with other readers? Send your ideas and hints to: The Editor, Historic Huntsville Quarterly, 405 Homewood Drive, S.W., Huntsville, Ala. 35801.







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