

Purchase and Move of the Lee House

Note: Darwin moved the bottom story, and then the second story, roof, and, last, the back one-story and a half of the house that was built in 1841 by Charity Cooper's second husband, Houston H. Lee. Darwin did not move the section of the house that was the original two-room brick structure, built by James Cooper in 1818, to Madison. Many of the bricks were taken and used to make the walkway under the porches. No basement is under the house in its current location.

Military families lived in the Lee House until 1973. In 1973, the Government sold the historic Lee House and 17 other structures to Surplus, Inc. of Arab, Alabama. The company was required to move the structures within a year. The sale of the Lee House to the surplus company made big news in Huntsville. It was probably at this time the house gained the title "Lee Mansion" in the media. Many of the local people who were interested in historic homes and preservation of them were unhappy with the thought the Lee House would be torn down. John Tyler Darwin and his wife rescued it.

John Tyler Darwin had roots in the land that is now RSA. His grandmother lived south of the Harris farm. The Darwin land was lost to I. Schiffman & Co., Inc. during the Depression. Darwin had known the Lee House all of his life and did not want it to be destroyed.

Darwin started tearing down the chimneys on the Lee House in 1973 and began moving the house shortly thereafter. Darwin moved the bottom story and then the second story, the roof, and then the back one-story and a half. He did not move the original two rooms to Madison, but he did use some of the bricks from the original 1818 home. The bricks for the original house were brought from Chattanooga by flatboat on the Tennessee River to Ditto's Landing, and moved by slaves to the house site.

Darwin had planned to rebuild the old Lee basement, but he changed his mind mid-way through the moving operation. It is probable that the Army later filled in the basement and it is intact beneath the surface. The carriage house, blacksmith shop and all other outbuildings are gone, but the Army has never built on the site.

Sam Harris Jr. Comments on the Moving of the J.B. Harris Home/Lee House

The front of the house was moved but the old part was razed. "That was a crime." Sam Harris said, noting that the Army has never built on the site. His feelings are understandable; however, if it were not for Darwin, the entire structure would be gone.