

THE CULBERT CABIN AND HOMESTEAD



Photo by Macey Taylor

Originally located about nine miles from Laws Landing, the 176 year old Culbert Cabin is thought to have been built about 1839 by Scotch-Irish immigrants, Matthew Culbert and Brother James, close to the time they arrived in the Kirbytown area. Matthew was about 39 years of age at that time. According to Oral family legend, the cabin was near the river, flooded the first winter, and was moved to higher ground. The brothers were listed on the Early Settler's Government Survey Map of 1839 on the very lots they applied for in 1843. The settlers were allowed pre-emptive rights for a fee and proof of improvements. The surveyor noted, "Aug. 1839 paid for in the fourth quarter of the year 1839."

The Culbert Landing was listed on a 1909 map at the south bank on the slough between their land and Pine Island. The Natives that had inhabited the Island had gone west in the infamous "Trail of Tears". Since early deeds did not always list dwellings we do not know if there were Native American cabins on Matthew's and James' property at the time of their arrival.

The larger Culbert homestead was probably built about 1845 when Matthew's patent was granted and the time of his marriage to Elizabeth Ann Armstrong in the same year. By the 1850 census five people were living in the household and eight were in the home by his death in September of 1861.

Matthew had received several grants, purchased other acreage, and eventually owned over 1000 acres. He had also acquired the property of his brother James after his death in 1846. His personal property was estimated in his estate at just under three thousand dollars. The size and total value of the "plantation", the crops and equipment, is listed at 10 to 12,000 dollars in Elizabeth's Civil War claim. Matthew's death had left her with six young children under 14 years of age, a very large farm to run and a war brewing around her. The location of the home gave her a view of the war but also put her and the children in the middle of it.

The homestead, about 12 miles upriver from Gunter's Landing, sat on top of the first hill of a ridge of low lying mountainous hills that ran on the south side of the river. The cabin, located about 100 yards from house, was put to use for Culbert farm hands, and extended family members. Mt. Moriah church was located on the third hill. During the Civil war, school at the church had been discontinued and the confederates used it as a base. The Federals who controlled the river fired from their gunboats and littered the hill sides with shells.

Elizabeth Culbert Wright's father, Stephen Armstrong, was living in the Culbert Cabin near the homestead in May of 1864, during one of the Union shellings, when a dud lodged in the cabin's exterior wall. He was killed while attempting to dismantle it. His young son Asa was also killed and his stepson, Solomon beam, was badly injured. His grandson, James Culbert, oldest son of Matthew and Elizabeth, lost two fingers.

Several attacks listed in the Alabama Civil War Naval Records Time Line could possibly have resulted in Stephen's and Asa's death. One such incident was the shelling on April 12-16, 1864, when Brigadier General John W. Geary, with a Federal gunboat and two large transports, made a scouting trip along the south bank of the Tennessee River from Bridgeport to Guntersville and Decatur. Confederate troops from the hillside opened fire on the heavy armored gunboat and received cannon fire in return. Geary named all the islands and the number of boats that were found and destroyed along the way. At Laws Ferry, not far from the Culbert homestead, he found one boat and destroyed it. In his report he writes "from this point beyond we found a continuous chain of mountains on our left with arable land on the river

banks, and heavy swamps and morasses between it and the foot of the mountain. Many farms were under cultivation, but the majority of the laborers fled from the fields toward the rebel pickets as we approached, and several fine cotton plantations were visible." General Geary, in another report, mentions the guards he left at Matthew's and Law's landing on his way to attack Guntersville on July 28, 1862.

Because of her support of the union, Elizabeth had been threatened and raided by both the confederates and the federals. She testified in 1874 before the Commissioner of Civil War Claims that she had been satisfied with the government as it was. They also heard the deposition of Nathaniel Lee's statement that Matthew was a union man. Elizabeth told the Civil War Claims Commission of her capture at Larkins landing, by the confederates, where they took her horse and then let her go. She was attempting to carry clothes to her new husband, James Wright, a carpenter for the Union at Bridgeport.

From the depositions we learn that The "Rebels" took her Irish cattle in 1862 and the federals, including her brother James Armstrong, took horses, cattle, oak fence rails and the harvest from her farm on several occasions with promises of repayment from the government. On dec.24, 1864 he was captured and shot by confederates. In February of 1865, after more threats and a raid that took "even their clothing" Elizabeth and her children were taken by wagon to the Union boats on the river and carried to Bridgeport, Alabama, until the close of the war.

In 1870, Elizabeth and five of her seven children and two farm laborers were living in the homestead. Her oldest son James had married Sarah Jane Patterson in 1868 and was living in the cabin near the homestead. By the 1880 census Andrew Culbert was listed as head of the household with mother Elizabeth and his sisters Letitia and Mary. Matthew Culbert's will was honored in 1880 and his estate was divided into six lots, one for each child, and one tract of 160 acres at the river, which was left to wife Elizabeth. This she left to her youngest child, Gad Wright. The survey plat shows James received lot 1; Mathew, lot 2; Letitia, lot 3; Andrew, lot 4; Stephen, lot 5 (the homestead); Mary E. "Molly's" lot 6 was held for her until she reached 21. Elizabeth received a lifetime interest in the home. Stephen swapped the homestead (lot 5) in the division for his sister Letitia's lot 3 which allowed her, their mother Elizabeth, and their younger siblings to stay in the home. After Matthew and Elizabeth's daughter Letitia married Frank Kirby, she remained in the home with her mother. The loss of her mother Elizabeth's second husband in 1891 and her own husband, Frank Kirby, a year later, left the two women

to manage the homestead and farm. The sons of Matthew and Elizabeth had settled around them on their own farms by 1880. The local newspaper, the *Democrat*, noted when Stephen Culbert left the farm for Texas and when the other Culbert brothers brought the farm produce into Guntersville; "James Culbert was in town today (Aug. 1894) from Mid with a wagon load of provisions. He sold A.G. Henry 1,750 pounds of meat and John Gilbreath & Brothers a barrel of prime leaf lard."

The hills and valleys of the farm, with the crops, fruit trees and cattle, surrounded with miles of split rail fencing along the river and across the rolling pastures, must have been a beautiful sight in spring. Letitia, the mistress of the homestead after her mother Elizabeth's death, had been staying in Guntersville for a while and arrived home in March of 1921 in time to see "the beautiful peach blossoms (on the farm) that look like white roses." Neither Elizabeth nor Letitia lived to see the taming of the Tennessee River that brought modernization to North Alabama and destroyed their farm and others in the process.

Four generations of Culberts had lived in the cabin, and moved on by 1939, when TVA flooded the area after the building of the Guntersville Dam. James, during the early part of his marriage, had built an addition to the cabin. His son, James Jr. (Jim) acquired the cabin in 1918. In 1928 Jim moved to Oklahoma. He sold to his brother Joseph whose son, Samuel Gordon, was renting the cabin with attached rooms in the 1930s. The survey listed Gordon Culbert, young and married with two small children, living on the property south of Moriah School, section 26, township 6 range 4. He had been there about five years in the four room unpainted frame house, with a barn, crib, two sheds, smoke house, seed bin and a well house. Bathing was by tub and lighting by kerosene. The house was listed as being outside the flood line. A photo in the 1950s shows a pile of freshly picked cotton on the long front porch of the house and attached cabin with two small children lying on top and Mrs. Gordon Culbert (Laura Childress) standing out front of the home. He bought the 62 acres that he had been renting from his father Joe, plus another 100 acres in 1941. Gordon died in 1967 and his children inherited his property with the cabin. In 1975, it stood alone and deserted in the woods, with the house torn away, when the Tennessee Valley Authority purchased the remaining property for a coal gasification plant. At that time, Gordon's son, Joe D. Culbert, donated it for the family, to the Guntersville Historical Society,

The plantation, void of crops and buildings, had gone to pot by 1891; the local Sheriff, Rex Smalley, confiscated 8 ft. tall marijuana plants with a street value of over 8,000 dollars. The plants had been discovered by a TVA employee. The gasification plant was never built but the property retained the name "Murphy Hill" given by the TVA for Molly Culbert Murphy's place on the next hill above the homestead. It was leveled for the proposed plant which was never built.

The Culbert Cabin endured floods, storms, fires, a civil war and the treacherous fifteen mile trip over highway 227 from its former home near Mt. Moriah, past the State Park. Its Lincoln log construction proved to be most stable. End rot on some of the logs made it necessary to trim them down, making the cabin slightly smaller than its original size. The white oak, hand hewn, dovetailed logs appeared to be squared off by broad axe, without a splitter, to a size 5x13 and ends notched to hold them in place at the corners. Mud chinking had kept out the wind, rain and snow. Square nails were used to secure the door and window facings to the log walls. The sills used for floor joists were 9x14. Twenty tons of the cabin's foundation and chimney rocks made a separate trip and were carefully placed during the restoration. The huge carved stone arch of the fireplace was mounted as it had been before the move. A new cedar shake roof replaced the old tin one. The cabin would have originally been roofed with shakes. The glass in the two windows was removed and handmade wooden shutters mounted as was common on early cabins. Furnishings in the 1800 period completed the 1976 renovation. Paul Cooley and son Barry did most of the renovation on the 18x20 foot structure. Councilman Frank McLaughlin, Mayor George Barnett, Johnny Brookshire, and Gordon Ray Moon were instrumental in the preservation of the cabin.

In October 2014, the cabin received a new roof to replace the 1976 cedar shake roof, made possible by the donation of great, great granddaughter Allison Culbert Simpson and husband Earl. Her collection of family letters helped us to date Matthew's voyage to America from Balleigahan, Ireland, his arrival at the port of Philadelphia in 1830 where he visited family members, then on to Winchester, Tennessee. From there he traveled to Marshall County.

In 1833, When Matthew was preparing to take the ship to America his uncle wrote to brother James park in Knoxville, Tennessee, "Matthew, eldest son of James (Culbert), who has resided with us for "ten years past," is a young man "of excellent character and good behavior, entitling

him to respect and esteem by all his friends and hope will introduce him to respectability in the world. He is in my opinion incapable of any mean or unworthy conduct". The cabin stands today in 2015 to remind us of the strength and character of this and other early pioneers who tamed our land.

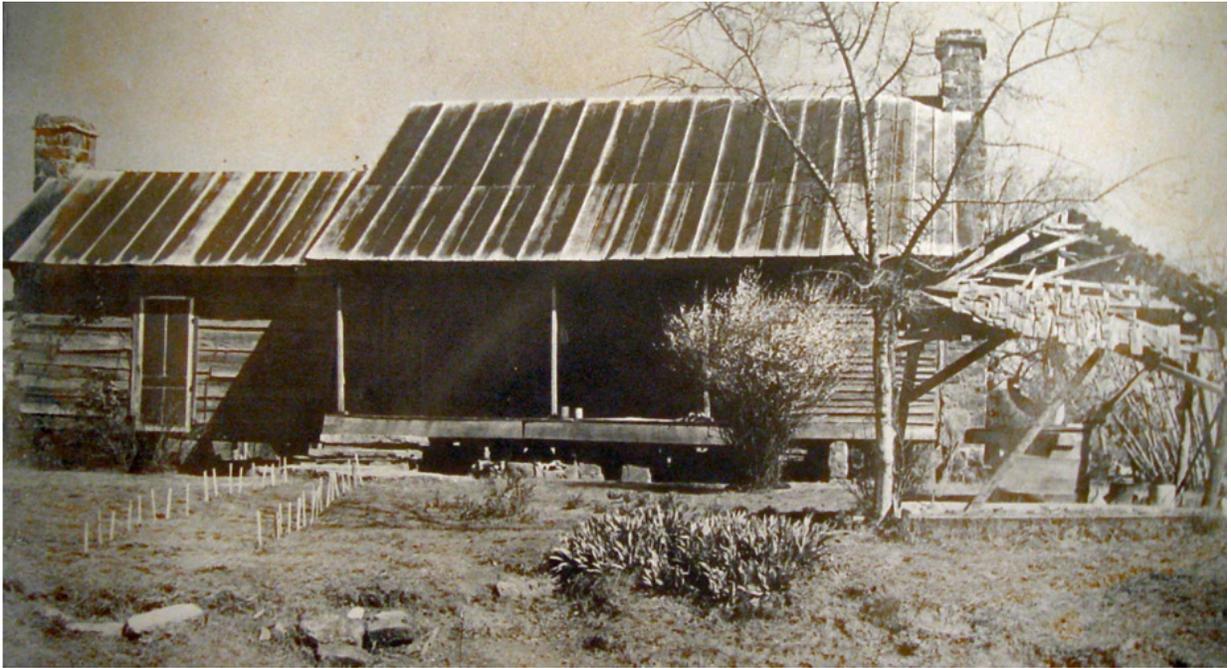


Photo in 1950's courtesy of Frances Ramelle

THE MATTHEW CULBERT CABIN AND SON JAMES' ADDITION

House photo courtesy of Frances Ramelle. Sources: the large collection of the family researchers on the Culbert Website, documents from Allison Culbert Simpson and Betty Bain Culbert. References: Naval log transcripts and county histories, Dr. Pete Sparks "A River town's Fight for Life", The Marshall County Archives provided news clippings, probate, marriage, census records, family files and helpful research assistance. (Macey Taylor, 2015)