

Smith Hall at LaGrange College, Georgia

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A New Look at the History of Smith Hall

By F. Clark Johnson

What began as a simple task of checking one fact for the pictorial history, anticipated to take about five minutes, turned into a full-scale investigation. Occasionally, "well known" and continuously repeated "facts" turn out this way. The facts in question, this time, were who built Smith Hall at LaGrange College, and in what year. Most sources credit Joseph Montgomery with having the building constructed in 1842 as part of his college facilities.

The problem arises when one tries to prove the facts. First, we decided to check the deeds, just to see when the land which is today's main campus of LaGrange College was purchased by Joseph and Hugh Montgomery. After an intensive search of the records, no deed has been located. The last sale of the property is recorded in 1844, when it was being sold by Julius C. Alford to Kinchen L. Haralson. There is no mistaking that it is the same piece of property, for a plat accompanies the deed. It is described as "the premises whereon the said Julius C. Alford now lives." The plat does not show a building, but on the site is written "Cedar Hill," which was the name of Alford's home.

This brings about the first question. Either Smith Hall was built by Alford or it was built after 1844. Next, we checked the deeds to see what they might reveal when the Montgomerys sold the school to the Methodist Church in 1856. There

is not a deed for that transaction, either. (This does not mean there never was a deed, it simply means it was never recorded in Troup County.) We checked the Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, and we found all the details about Joseph Montgomery selling the school to them. These minutes mention that the Montgomerys are "compelled by stress of debt to sell their College property." It describes the facilities as including "their College building known as LaGrange Female College and all the houses, including the Boarding house connected therewith, and also all the furniture in said College building, including some sixteen Pianos and other musical instruments, and all the furniture of every kind in the Boarding house, except that contained in the family rooms of the Messrs Montgomery." The college building would have been Dobbs Hall and Smith Hall, a dorm, was the boarding house. This makes it clear that Smith Hall was standing when the sale occurred in 1856, but does not clear up who built it or when.

We were able to confirm that the Montgomery brothers were the ones who moved the institution to "The Hill," from its original location at 406 Broad Street. This was found in the Acts of the State of Georgia for 1859 confirming the sale to the Methodist Church. It states that "Joseph T. Montgomery and Hugh B.T. Montgomery removed said Institution to a more eligible location, and incurred great expense in erecting buildings." This tends to confirm that the Montgomerys built Smith Hall and the old auditorium.

We can date the auditorium with great accuracy, for its original corner stone was dated 1851, and a deed for a lien was placed upon it in 1853 by one James Young, for the "lathing and plastering of" the chapel building. This confirms that the Montgomerys were suffering

"stress of debt," but says little of the dormitory. The fact that there is not a cornerstone on the original part of Smith Hall adds to the idea that it was built as a residence, originally, rather than as an institution.

In 1923, College President W.E. Thompson delivered a short history of the college, published in the local newspaper. He speaks of Smith Hall and describes it as having been renovated and enlarged many times. He also mentions that the building was once called the Cedars, which would agree with the name Alford had for his home. His reference to the building having been altered over the years would account for the fact that its room dimensions are not those of a regular home. That renovations have been made is confirmed by other sources, such as the Minutes of the Methodist Annual Conference for 1866, which says "The Boarding-house has been completed and prepared for the accommodation of about one hundred and fifty pupils." Part of the building burned in March 1860. The ensuing Civil War delayed completion of the repairs. (Dobbs Hall was more seriously burned in the 1860 fire and renovations on it were not completed until the 1870s.)

Some of this makes sense—it explains why the first building on the LaGrange College Campus was a dorm and not a classroom building. A house would be easier to convert into a dormitory than into classes. It may be the origin of Smith Hall's parlor which has been loved by generations of students. We do not know why this fact has been lost through history. When Irene Birdsong wrote her history of the school in the 1930s, she made no mention of Smith having once been a home. Alumni and long-term supporters, such as Lillian Clark, have also not heard this before. The National Register Nomination prepared in 1982 makes no mention of it

having served as anything but a College building. Perhaps there is another explanation but at this point we do not know what it is.

All of this leads us to think that Alford built what is now Smith Hall in 1842 as his home. Then Montgomery bought it and enlarged it for use as a dorm. It was called College Home for most of the late 1800s and named the Oreon Mann Smith Hall in 1911 for the deceased wife of the then President, Rufus Wright Smith. The name has been shortened to Smith Hall through popular usage. We have not exactly answered our initial question, but we have had fun coming up with these pieces of the puzzle!

[Caption to the photo, unavailable for

this reprint, that was printed with the article:]

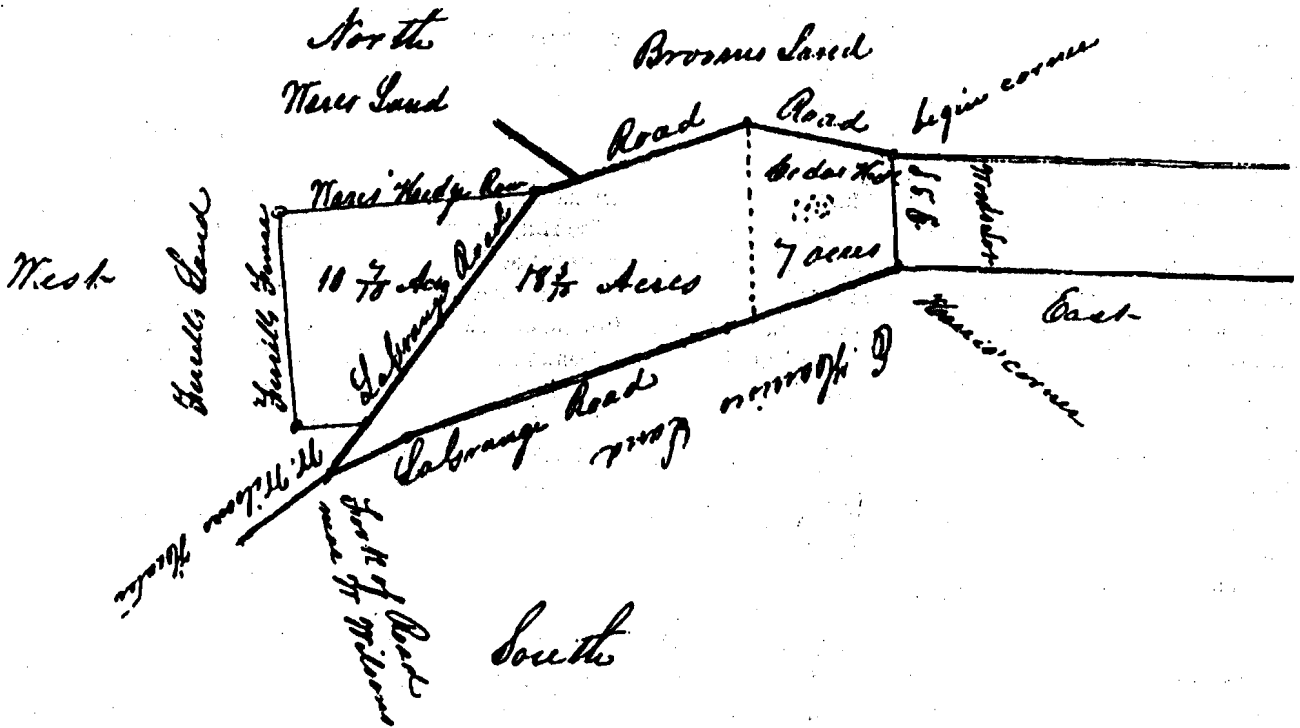
The four columns on Smith Hall, known affectionately as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are part of the oldest section of Smith Hall. Benjamin H. Cameron built this structure, probably for Julius C. Alford.

Letter

In a letter dated 6 Feb 1993 to Jim Alford, Clark Johnson gave further information:

I am enclosing some copies of the actual deeds. I have blown up the section which

had the plat, in case that will make it easier for you to use. The plat is with the deed of sale when Julius C. Alford sold the place in 1844 and the other is the deed when he bought the original portion of this property in 1830 from James F. Park. Park owned and subdivided the land just west of the original incorporated town of LaGrange, thus extending and enlarging the town physically. The added fact that Alford's wife, Eliza, died at her home in LaGrange, certainly tends to confirm that the house was already there before the college fell heir to it. It is also interesting to point out that Julius C. Alford was among the original trustees of LaGrange Female Academy in 1831. The school was originally located just a block east of Alford's Cedar Hill.



The enclosed deed of sale, recorded twice, answers the first question. Alford bought the hill area in 1830. He was at the time of the deed described as already being "of Troup County". The second question, the house could have been built earlier than 1842, but that is the date that every quotable source has always stated. It can not have been built before 1827 when the land (sold to the United States by the Creek Nation in 1825) was distributed by the State in lottery. Certainly, Alford could not have built it prior to 1830 when he bought the land. It may be that he built this imposing home while he was in Congress, thinking he would need such a showplace. As to the builder, that, too, has been common knowledge. When the place burned prior to the War Between the States, Cameron was re-employed to renovate. Only the house, or dormitory, was finished and the college building stood in ruins throughout the war, and in fact was completed about 1877 by Horace King, a former slave and master covered bridge builder, who often worked with Cameron. Cameron built several similar, brick buildings in LaGrange at the same time, roughly. He built the first brick courthouse about 1829-1830. He built the brick Presbyterian Church in 1844, which has columns identical to Smith Hall's, which were like a signature of Cameron's. They were stacked rock and brick, smoothed over with plaster or cement-like stuff to form Doric columns. Several of the houses which Cameron built have the same columns, even when the houses were frame. Alford Street is a much more recent addition to the town, named for The Warhorse, I imagine, but did not exist at the time he was living.

I hope you won't mind if I point out that Alford, nor his father, moved into this area and built while the Creek Indians were still in possession. You have the date 1829 for the father, and that is four years after the Creek sale and two years after the lottery wherein the State gave away the land to Georgia residents. It should also be noted, however, that

Julius C. Alford did travel through this area in 1825 with the party which accompanied the Marquis de LaFayette to Alabama from Savannah. It was Alford who heard LaFayette remark that the West Georgia land resembled his home at Chateau LaGrange, in France. From that, Alford was the one who suggested the name "LaGrange" for Troup County's county seat in a public meeting in 1827 or 1828. Ergo, it is not farfetched to say that Julius C. Alford is, even if indirectly, responsible for the statue of LaFayette being in the square of LaGrange today. He is certainly credited with the town's name.

If you would like to order pictures of Smith Hall, we have several to choose from. The cost is determined by the size and whether or not we actually have a negative, or just a print. Let us know. I think . . . that an 8 x 10 print is \$10.00, but to have a negative made is an additional \$7.00. . . . [Write to Troup County Archives, P.O. Box 1051, LaGrange, GA 30241.]

Addendum

By Jim Alford, AAFA #115

Subsequent correspondence with Clark Johnson brought forth these additional facts:

Though Julius C. Alford guided the Marquis de LaFayette through the region (1825) and even named LaGrange (1828), he did not reside in Troup County in the June 1, 1830 Census. It is certain instead that he was the Julius C. Alford in Covington (Newton County), Georgia at that time, where he likely felt his family was safer from Indian attack. His eldest daughter, Juliet Warren Alford, was born in Covington six years earlier on January 16, 1824.

The land that was to become Cedar Hill was surveyed 22 May 1830 and the Deed of Sale conveying title from James

S. Park to Julius C. Alford was executed on 7 June 1830 in Greensboro, (Greene County) Georgia, where Alford had been raised. The tract was seventeen acres adjoining a similar tract sold earlier to Hugh A. Haralson. Despite the reference to Alford being "of the County of Troup," the deed was not recorded there until 27 May 1831.

In the 1840 Census of Troup County, p. 344, Julius C. Alford is listed next to Hugh Haralson. Unless both men moved after 1830 and still remained neighbors, this is solid evidence that Alford was living at Cedar Hill before 1842. As a side note, it appears that Haralson may have taken Alford's State Senate seat when Alford went to the House of Representatives in 1837.

Julius C. Alford lived at Cedar Hill as much as twelve years longer than has been assumed and it is altogether likely that his elegant Greek Revival home was there all the while. Next time you're in Western Georgia make a special point to see it. It is still impressive perched high on its cedar-covered hill. ♦

Missing Person

Harold Velie, 100 South Main St., East Granby, CT 06026-0403, is trying to locate **Henry Alford** in order to invite him to a 50th high school reunion in 1994. Henry lived in Newburgh in the Hudson Valley of NY in the 1940s. The Newburgh schools did not offer a course in agriculture, so he commuted to the town of Marlboro, NY, Mr. Velie's home town, where it was offered. Henry graduated in June, 1944, from Marlboro Central High School. Henry would be about 65 years old, and Mr. Velie would like to contact his old friend even if Henry cannot attend the reunion. Anyone who has information that might help Mr. Velie can call him collect at (203) 653-2072.