

Vanishing Georgia

None So Perfect as Clinton

INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM LAMAR CAWTHON, JR.

Unique in this state, the especially noteworthy historic county seat of Clinton preserves the ambience of the early 19th century better than any other town in Georgia.

Clinton is one of Georgia's historic jewels, a village of early 19th century houses set on quiet, tree-shaded streets laid out in the original grid pattern. With Clinton's atmosphere of antiquity and leafy tranquility, visitors today can step back in time and see what town life was like in early antebellum

Georgia. Clinton is Georgia's only surviving county seat of government in which a number of the houses from its heyday survive without significant later development. Thus, the core of the old town, which served as the seat of Jones County from 1808 to 1905, imparts a living feeling for what Georgia county seat towns

were like almost two centuries ago.

The feel and atmosphere of an earlier Georgia abounds in Clinton, which is located about twelve miles northeast of Macon. The best way to see the old town today is on foot, for Clinton is a relic of an era when towns were compact and walking was an essential means of movement. Hence, visitors gain a feel for the intimacy inherent in town living at that time, when everything was within walking distance and residents knew each other.

Founders of Clinton chose the site because three springs were located near-



Frances B. Johnston took this photograph of the interior of Lowther Hall in 1939 or 1944.



Branan Sanders photographed the interior parlor of the Johnson House in March 1934.

by. For years, one of the springs provided water to Gray, the second (and current) seat of Jones County. The original lay of the land at Clinton remains evident. Since the founders did not have the option of bulldozing and leveling the rolling terrain, they adapted the streets and buildings to the landscape. The orientation of parallel streets on a southwest/northeast axis helped funnel the prevailing summer breezes into town.

Clinton's street layout is most evident near the old courthouse square. The southwest/northeast streets are 60 feet wide, while those running southeast/northwest are 30 feet wide. These are the public right-of-way dimensions, which included space for sidewalks. The street names honor the heroes and ideals of the Revolution and the early years of the republic: Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Randolph, Pinckney, Marion, Pulaski, and Liberty. A street was also named for Benjamin Hawkins, the famous Indian agent, whose will was probated in Jones County.

Jake's Woods, a nearby area of granite boulders, provided building material that Clinton residents used in street curbing, exterior steps, foundations for boot scrapers, a mounting post, a well structure, cemetery enclosures, and a two-story jail.

The handsome, well-built town made an impression on outsiders and newcomers. In 1824 a woman from New Bedford, Massachusetts, upon her arrival in Clinton as the wife of Wilson Pope, wrote to her family in New England: "The appearance of Clinton exceeded my expectations. It is laid out in squares with broad streets. The houses are neat and some of them large and handsome."

At the time of the 1820 census, Clinton was one of Georgia's largest towns. While not in the same category as Savannah, Augusta, and Milledgeville, Clinton was roughly the same size as Washington, one of the Georgia upcountry's leading towns. At that time Clinton actually had more people engaged in

commerce and manufacturing than did Washington. Clinton was larger than Madison and considerably larger than Athens and Brunswick. Macon, Columbus, Atlanta, and Rome did not yet exist.

In 1820 Jones County boasted the second largest population in the state and the largest number of white residents. In 1824, Jones, Jasper and Wilkes were the only three counties that had as many as four representatives in the state legislature. Not even Savannah's Chatham County sent as many.

As reflected by this representation, Middle Georgia during Clinton's heyday led the state in population, as well as in political leadership. In Georgia's primary



Clinton's Johnson House, photographed by Frances B. Johnston in 1939 or 1944.



Clinton's Jade-Barron House in 1939 or 1944.

economic activity, agriculture, Middle Georgia was also preeminent. Middle Georgia was the state's largest and most influential plantation belt throughout the antebellum years. As late as 1840 the Lower Piedmont counties alone accounted for 59% of the cotton produced in the state.

For the most part, the historic role of cotton in the American and world economies has been forgotten. Not only was cotton the leading American export throughout the antebellum period, it was a major catalyst for the burgeoning industrial revolution in both Europe and America. It was the prime mover of the American economy, most particularly during the years of Clinton's primacy.¹

During Clinton's heyday, the South Carolina and Georgia Piedmont together formed the world's premier cotton producing region.² This ranking lasted from

approximately 1800 into the 1830s, with Clinton's prime lasting from the close of the War of 1812 until about 1840.

Samuel Griswold established a cotton gin factory in Clinton that by 1825 was manufacturing cotton gins on an extensive scale.³ For a number of years this was the largest cotton gin manufactory in the world.⁴ By 1849 Griswold employed at least 100 hands and produced 900 cotton gins annually.⁵ He shipped his gins via Concord wagons pulled by six large mules. For a time, Griswold's factory was the largest manufacturing establishment in Georgia owned by one individual.⁶

Griswold's cotton gin factory was the precursor to the three other leading cotton gin manufactories of antebellum America: those of Daniel Pratt in Prattville, Alabama, the W.G. Clemons, Brown & Company factory in

Columbus, Georgia, and the Atwood factory in Kosciusko, Mississippi. Pratt, Brown, and Atwood each learned the cotton gin business from Griswold in Clinton. Griswold was "an influential teacher who mentored a generation of gin makers."⁷

Around 1850 Griswold moved his cotton gin factory to the Central of Georgia Railroad in southern Jones County. He later converted the cotton gin operation into a Confederate weapons factory. By 1862 he and partner A. N. Gunnison from New Orleans were producing the famed Confederate Colt revolver. Nearly 3,700 of these side arms were manufactured, "a number unsurpassed by any other firm in the Confederacy."⁸

Sherman's army burned to the ground Griswold's buggy, wagon and farm implement factories in Clinton and his weapons factory in Griswoldville.⁹ These industries were never rebuilt. The only industrial remains visible today in Clinton are at the Morgan tannery site, one of the best preserved tanneries in the South. This, however, was not a Griswold industry.

Clinton was an early leader in women's education. Thomas Bogue Slade, born in North Carolina, came to Clinton in 1824 and became headmaster of the Clinton Academy. In 1833 he

Clinton Methodist Church, circa 1935. Located on Dames Ferry Road and built circa 1821, this is reportedly the first Methodist church and the second church established in Jones County.



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ABOVE: Clinton, before 1905. A group poses in front of the Clinton jail, which was built in 1842. Sheriff Bob Ethridge is second from the right.
RIGHT: Clinton, 1905. The old jail, under demolition here, after the county seat moved to Gray.



founded the Clinton Female Seminary, credited by the Rev. Adiel Sherwood in his 1837 *Gazetteer of Georgia* as “a most excellent female school, one of the first in the Southern States.”

In Milledgeville in December 1832, Slade delivered a memorable address to the prominent Teacher’s Society at its annual meeting. He advocated a system of common schools so that every child could learn to read and write, the advancement of academies, the “chief nurseries” of the morals and education of youth; and the importance of women’s education.¹⁰

The newly created Georgia Female College in Macon, the first college in the world chartered to grant degrees to women, persuaded Slade to merge his Clinton Female Seminary into the new college, which opened in January 1839. This merger permitted Georgia Female College (today’s Wesleyan College) to graduate a class the second year of its operation, demonstrating the “collegiate rank” of the Clinton Female Seminary.¹¹ In essence, the Clinton Seminary became the nucleus around which “the first female college” was built. Slade’s students from Clinton formed a majority of the pupils at Georgia Female College upon its opening.

Slade became the first Professor of Natural Sciences at the new college. Included in the merger were his chemical apparatus for experiments, a geodus for

astronomical studies, pianos, and the two music teachers from the Clinton Female Seminary. Slade arranged the curriculum for the college and, in 1840, wrote the

BELOW: Two young women, Tessie and Marion, seated on the “Rock of Ages,” a popular location for photographs. This photo was taken in 1905, the year that the county seat moved from declining Clinton.





Frank Butler Black and wife Sally Barfield Black posed for this studio portrait, circa 1900. Mr. Black was a farmer, mail carrier, and chairman of the Republican Party in Jones County.

diploma for the first woman to receive a bachelor's degree in America, and some say in the world.

With the gradual sapping of Clinton's strength by Macon, and by the massive westward movement of the population, Clinton became an average-sized county seat with an "aristocratic" bearing, surrounded by the ample estates of wealthy planters. As a result of this decline, Clinton did not participate in the full flowering of Greek Revival architecture of the late antebellum period. All of the town's major buildings were constructed in the early 19th century, reflecting for the most part either the Federal period of architecture or simple but solid Georgia vernacular.

Especially prominent in Clinton are the "I" houses, named for the end chimneys on each side of the dwelling. These are simple, two-story structures that are one main room deep. Federal details were frequently found in these houses. Clinton has a number of examples of

Masons pose for this 1910 photograph in front of the structure that had served as the Jones County Courthouse until 1905.

Greek Revival." Since the Mitchell-Blair house was built in 1819, it is noteworthy

small "I" dwelling houses without a central hall, an early form. Many of these have the beaded weatherboarding common in the 18th and early 19th centuries, a feature found in the houses of Williamsburg, Virginia.

Clinton does feature three examples of early Greek Revival architecture—two law offices with pedimented fronts and, most noteworthy, the Mitchell-Smith-Bowen-Barron-Blair house. Frederick Doveton Nichols, author of *The Early Architecture of Georgia*, considered the Mitchell-Blair house an example of the transition from the one-story shed porches of the sand hills cottage to "the heroic porticoes of the late

as a particularly early Greek Revival dwelling.

Clinton witnessed firsthand the drama and the desolation of Sherman's March to the Sea. The 15,000 men of Major General Peter Osterhaus' XV Corps, Major General Oliver Howard's Right Wing of Sherman's Army, passed through on the way to Savannah. The federal troops left about one third of the town in ashes. Clinton never recovered. When the railroad was routed one-and-a-half miles to the northeast in the mid 1880s, Clinton's fate was sealed. By 1888 the town that had once boasted "36 stores and places of business" had but one remaining. The town of Gray sprang up on the railroad tracks and, by 1905, had become the seat of Jones County.

In a 1922 article, "New England in Georgia," *House and Garden* magazine recognized that there were a number of Georgia towns bearing likeness to the quaint towns of New England, "though none so perfect as Clinton." Yet the only Clinton dwelling known to have been built by a New Englander was Lowther





The old Jones County Courthouse, photographed by Telamon Cuyler in 1913. This structure, which was built circa 1816, served as the county courthouse until 1905.

Hall, Clinton's "grand mansion."¹² The "New England" feel of Clinton is due to the simple, solid Federal and early 19th century style of construction that was the standard across the long-settled parts of the South, from Maryland to Georgia. All the other towns grew and changed, or completely died, leaving only a structure or two, or none at all. Unlike all the rest, Clinton has maintained its early 19th century character.

The *House and Garden* article perceptively described Clinton as "one of our native variations [which] has kept its distinct qualities," and it remains so today. Yet modern urban sprawl along U.S. Hwy 129 is encroaching on one side of the historic town. Time remains to take action to preserve its unique early antebellum character, and there is even potential



This building was once the home of Jane Thigpen (1823-1914). She was a well-known 19th century poet who wrote under the name Jessie Linn. Later this building was utilized as a school, as was probably the case at the time of this photograph.

for Clinton to become Georgia's version of Colonial Williamsburg—a historic town restoration of the first rank. But conservationists need to act quickly, before modern sprawl further degrades Clinton's antiquity.

Clinton is unique in Georgia and the South. The ambience and feel of an earlier era is unmistakable, giving the town a genuine quality that cannot be duplicated. The years of Clinton's greatest standing and influence encompass the eras of the War of 1812, Jacksonian Democracy, and through the early antebellum period.

Clinton provides a special insight into our lineage, our history, and our heritage—the past that helped shape who and what we are today.

William Lamar Cawthon, a founder of the Old Clinton Historical Society, has a law degree and a master of arts in history from the University of Georgia. He resides on his ancestral plantation near Eufaula, Alabama.

Endnotes

1. Gilbert C. Fite and Jim E. Reese, *An Economic History of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965,



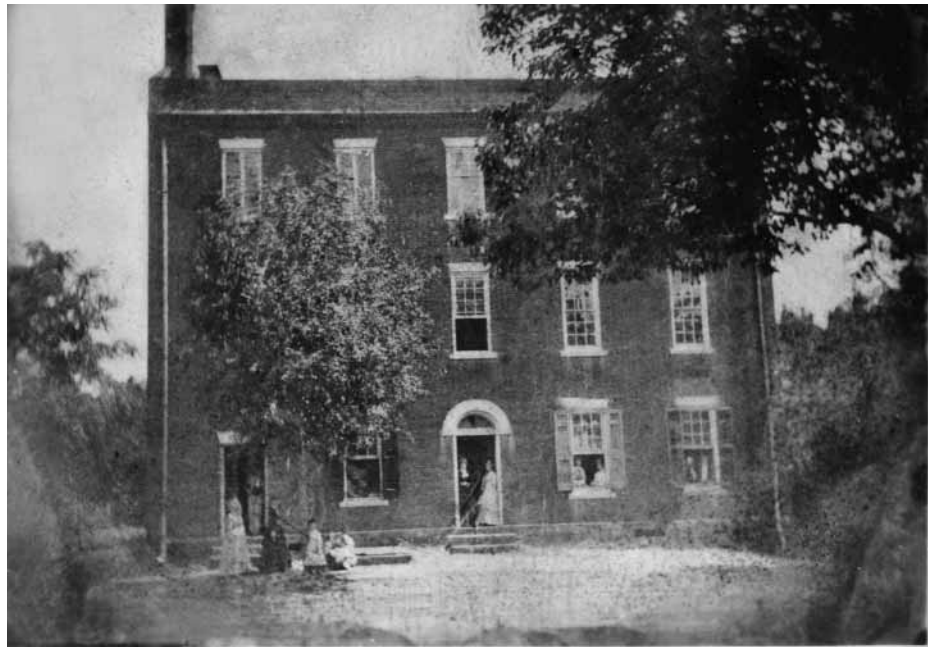
Clinton, November 1869. Students and teachers at J.T. Waterman's School. This building had previously been the Clinton Female Seminary, started in 1821. Front Row (L-R): Gus Stewart, Carter Etheridge, Frank Stewart, Ben Barron, Joe Griswold, Susie Juhan, Lillie Wilson, Lizzie Johnson, Jack Baron, A. Wilson, Annie Greaves, Lucia Etheridge, Sissie Lizzie Roberts, Ellen May Bonner. Second Row: Miss Thompson, Lula Griswold, Willie Barron, unknown, Jim Barron, Giles Bonner, Lou Brown, Lizzie Griswold, Mr. Waterman, Betty Johnson, Lizzie Gibson, Mattie Cheatham, unknown, A. Wilson. Third Row: unknown, Mr. Thompson, Mack Smith, Lark Stewart, unknown, Charlie Brown, Charlie Morris, Willie Johnson, Mr. Thompson, Joel Godard, Little Frank Greaves.

1959, pp. 182–183.

2. U. S. Department of Agriculture, *Atlas of American Agriculture*, 1918, maps on pp. 16–17 showing cotton production in the United States. Since the U. S. was the largest cotton producing country, certainly for the international trade, the Georgia-South Carolina Piedmont was the premier cotton producing region of the world.

3. James L. Watkins, *King Cotton: A Historical and Statistical Review, 1790–1908* (New York: James L. Watkins & Sons), p. 101.

4. Mrs. S. F. H. Tarrant, *Hon. Daniel Pratt: A Biography* (Richmond, Virginia: Whittet and Shepperson, 1904), p. 107. Carolyn White Williams, *History of Jones*



Clinton, before 1890. Masonic Hall located on the courthouse square was built circa 1818. The bottom floor was used for businesses, the middle for living quarters, and the top for Masonic meetings.



This circa 1930 photograph is of Lowther Hall, built by Samuel Lowther in 1822. Daniel Pratt is thought to have been the architect. The house, which was later owned by members of the Hardeman, Pursley, and Jones families, burned in 1945 or '46.

County, Georgia (Macon, Georgia: J. W. Burke & Co., 1957), p. 509.

5. George White, *Statistics of the State of Georgia* (Savannah: W. Thorne Williams, 1849), p. 355.

6. Williams, p. 508-09.

7. Angela Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 98–121.

8. William Harris Bragg, “Griswoldville,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, www.georgiaencyclopedia.org. Updated 12/8/2010.

9. Information from John W. Bonner, former head of the Hargrett Library of the University of Georgia, and a direct descendant of Samuel Griswold.

10. Dorothy Orr, *A History of Education in Georgia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1950), pp. 110, 113–114.

11. This evaluation of Slade’s Clinton Seminary is found in Orr at p. 113.

12. Lowther Hall was built by Daniel Pratt, founder of Prattville, Alabama, and the owner of the largest cotton gin factory in the world in 1860. Pratt learned the gin business in Clinton from Griswold. ■



This photo of Clinton was taken circa 1900.