HISTORY OF TUSCALOOSA

There are very few cities in Alabama with a history as varied and interesting as Tuscaloosa. One could travel by boat up the river as far north as Tuscaloosa from Mobile by the 1820s and this did much to shape its destiny.

The Creek Indians had a large village here when the white man first arrived, led by Thomas York about 1816. The Indians were driven out in Andrew Jackson's war against the Creek nation in 1813. Other early family settlers besides York were McGee, Cochrane, Moody, and Dearing.

Tuscaloosa was incorporated in 1819 and by 1826 had a population of 1,500. The name "Tuscaloosa" is derived from two Choctaw words, "Tushka," meaning warrior, and the "Lusa" meaning black.

From its earliest days, Tuscaloosa was noted for its tree-lined avenues and lovely houses. Many architectural styles reflect the varied influences in home building. The Italianate, the French, Greek revival, Roman Revival, Frontier, Federal, Gothic and many lovely Victorian houses.

Tuscaloosa was the capital of Alabama from 1826 until 1847. During this time many important events occurred including the opening of the University of Alabama (1831), the removal of the Indians to the Far West, and the building of many beautiful homes.

After the State Legislature moved the capital to Montgomery, Tuscaloosa's population declined from 4,230 in 1846 to 1,950 four years later, and another serious reverse was the Civil War. In April 1865, Federal troops led by General John Croxton left the Warrior River Bridge, the factories, and the principal buildings of the University of Alabama ruins. Recovery was slow and times were hard, but progress was made. A new river bridge was constructed, the University reopened, and two banks were founded. "Telegraphic" items appeared in local newspapers in 1869. The A.G.S Railroad reached Tuscaloosa in 1878.

After 1887, a new city hall was built, the streets were gravelled, a public school system was established, and private enterprise provided a city waterworks system and an electric light plant. The U.S. Government built locks, 10, 11 and 12 on the Warrior River located near Tuscaloosa. The town marsh was replaced by a police force, and a paid fire department was established. As prosperity returned, beautiful homes reappeared. In 1912 the Alston Building was constructed on Greensboro Avenue and at that time was the tallest structure on a dirt street in the United States. Today, Tuscaloosa has grown to an estimated population of 75,000 within the city.

Tuscaloosa has been called "The Druid City" or the "City of Oaks." In ancient times the Druids were a class of Celts who had the oak trees in great reverence and conducted their rituals in oak forests. As Tuscaloosa grew, more and more oak trees were planted to add to the original forest trees, and for this reason, the city became known as "Druid City." Some of the giant oaks still spread their branches over the spacious and modern avenues throughout Tuscaloosa.

Beautiful homes dating from 1820 to 1920 are scattered throughout the original old city. Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society was founded in 1995 for the preservation of our cultural heritage; especially the irreplaceable varied designed old homes. The first of the landmarks "saved" by the Society was The Old Tavern. William Dunton built the Old Tavern in 1827. He was a hotelkeeper of early Tuscaloosa who also operated the Golden Ball Hotel located where the First National Bank now stands. Through the years the structure has been a tavern, a stagecoach inn, and a residence. The building has been known by many names: Old French Tavern, French House, Old Inn, Spanish House, Old Stage Coach Inn, Ewing's Tavern, and Wilson House.

No other structure in North Alabama so well illustrates the French influence on early Alabama architecture as the Old Tavern. It is similar in style to many old French homes in Mobile and New Orleans. Wide planks were used for flooring; laths were hand cut; and much of the structure was put together with pegs. There are six rooms—three downstairs and four upstairs—with a narrow staircase connecting. The kitchen and dining room were in the basement. The Old Tavern was the regular point of arrival and departure of stagecoaches that linked Tuscaloosa with other Southern towns.

Members of the Legislature often stayed in the Old Tavern, and state committee meetings were sometimes held there. In those days, there was not a state-owned governor's home. At least one governor, John Gayle (1831-1835) lived in the Tavern during his administration. Governor Gayle's daughter Amelia married General Gossiah Gorgas, famous Confederate General and President of The University of Alabama in 1878-1879.

During the Civil War, many confederate soldiers stayed here. It is said that the entire family of Confederate General S.A.M. Wood lived in the inn after being forced from their home in Florence by Union troops. The property continued to be used as a hotel-tavern until 1882 when it was sold to the Robert Wilson family as their residence.

In 1964, Miss Emma Wilson sold the Old Tavern to Egerton Harris, Jr., who deeded it to the Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society with the permission that it be moved to another site. With the help of citizens of the whole county, and especially of the school children, money was raised to pay for moving the Old Tavern to Capitol Square, a spot of historic significance because of the close connection of the state capital and the legislators with the Old Tavern. The landmark is open to the public daily except on Mondays. There is a small charge for admission.

Another landmark operated by the Preservation Society is the Battle-Friedman House, which was built in 1835. Alfred Battle, a native of North Carolina, moved to Tuscaloosa in 1821, and was the builder of the Battle-Friedman Home. With its servant's house, carriage house, and grounds, it occupied the entire block. The two-story house was built of brick with walls 18 inches thick. The facade is plastered with cement and marked off to imitate stone blocks. Six white square pillars support the portico. Two double-doors, framed by a fine-cut crystal fanlight and side transoms, form the colonial doorway. A small but decorative balcony hands over the door. Inside the entrance is a large almost square hall, with large rooms on either side. Delicate and elaborate frescoes form the edges of the ceiling and make a circular center for the beautiful crystal chandeliers. All inside walls are of solid brick. At the end of the front hall, another hall goes across the house, and beyond this a large room extends the entire width of the building. From this cross-hall the stairway goes to the second floor. The architecture is Greek revival.

Bernard Friedman purchased the home in 1875. His son, Hugo Friedman, who lived his entire life there, bequeathed it to the City of Tuscaloosa at his death in 1965. The home has been restored, and is operated as a culture center. The landmark is open Tuesday through Sunday and is available for parties and wedding receptions.

The Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society maintains its offices in the McGuire-Strickland House. A raised Creole cottage in the Greek revival style and built in 1820, the Strickland House is believed to be the oldest, wood frame structure in Tuscaloosa County. In addition to square nials and wooden pegs, hand-hewn timbers, some of the entire length of the house, can be seen as evidence of early Alabama workmanship. No doubt much of the wood used in the original construction of this house, still in use, cut and prepared locally, was from pine trees more than 50 years old, some much older. Thus, in this landmark is the oldest Tuscaloosa County wood in continuous use as a structure in the area. Timbers and other wood in this old home predate the Revolutionary War.

Built for Moses McGuire, Tuscaloosa County's first probate judge and some of a Revolutionary War veteran, it was acquired by the Tuscaloosa Presbyterian Church as a parson in the 1850's and sold to the Milton Strickland family in 1866. It remained in the Strickland family until 1969 when it was given to the Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society for relocation and restoration.

A brother of Moses McGuire, John McGuire, was the father of ten children. A Great-granddaughter, Florence McGuire, became the wife of the Honorable W.B. Bankhead, a distinguished Alabama Congressman and father of Tallulah. A great-grandson, Jack H. McGuire, served as a director of Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society for many years.

The structure was relocated from the northeast corner of the intersection of Greensboro Avenue and 15th street. The Tuscaloosa Altrusa Club took a leading role in raising the money to move and restore the structure. The front living room of the house is known as the Altrusa Room and is furnished with antiques to the period. The McGuire-Strickland home is also open to the public.