

History of Cleveland Hall

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Going toward Lebanon Road from Old Hickory, just past Andrew Jackson School and on your right, is Cleveland Hall, home of Mr. and Mrs. John Donelson VI. A graceful old Georgian mansion, it sits serene in the midst of its rolling acres, far back from the highway behind a bluegrass lawn, with ancient cedars marching in stately rows on each side of the long driveway.



Cleveland Hall is one of the famous homes in this section and one of the few that are still owned and occupied by descendants of Col. John Donelson, who led his valiant party of pioneers by boat from Ft. Patrick Henry, in the Watauga Settlements of what is now North Carolina, to the Cumberland country in 1779. The story of this remarkable journey is one of the most amazing in the history of the settlement of the West.

Col. John Donelson's family was one of the leading families of Virginia during the years leading up to the American Revolution. Col. Donelson himself was a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and some of his distinguished colleagues were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee.

When plans were being made to seek out new lands in the rich Cumberland country, as yet unsettled by white men, it was decided that James Robertson, one of the leading spirits of the Watauga Settlements, should take a party by land. Col. Donelson came by the longer, though slightly less difficult, route which led down the Holston River to the Tennessee, down the Tennessee to the Ohio, up the Ohio for a short distance to the mouth of the Cumberland to the Great French Lick, which is now Nashville.

Nearly two hundred persons, including a number of slaves, comprised the party which left the Watauga Settlements on December 22, 1779. They traveled on flatboats, dugouts and scows, led by Col. Donelson's "good boat Adventure." Only the bare essentials, such as food, clothing, cooking utensils, farm tools, necessary household furnishings, bedding, medicines and seeds could be brought along. In the company was James Robertson's family and the families of many of the men who were taking the land route with Robertson. Col. Donelson's wife and eleven sons and daughters were all present, among them his 12-year-old daughter Rachel, the future wife of General Andrew Jackson.

Col. Donelson's diary contains a day-by-day account of this historic journey and is one of the important documents which record the history of this section of the country. The diary itself, now aged and yellow but perfectly legible, is one of the priceless objects in the possession of the present John Donelson and is appropriately kept at Cleveland Hall. The entries were made in an old surveyor's fee book, which also contains records of surveys made in Virginia and Maryland as far back as 1764. Col. Donelson was a surveyor and helped to survey the Virginia-North Carolina boundary line. He later made a copy of his diary, adding to it, and this copy is now the property of the Tennessee Historical Society.

Soon after his arrival at French Lick, Col. Donelson began seeking a suitable tract of land upon which to build his home and settle his family. Paddling up the Cumberland, he turned into the mouth of Stone's River and presently came to the tract now known as "Clover Bottom," where Lebanon Road crosses Stone's River. Recognizing the fertility of these level river bottoms, Col. Donelson immediately chose the spot as his home. His family was sheltered in open-faced cabins some 150 yards northwest of the present bridge, and crops were planted in Clover Bottom. Due to floods and hostile Indians in the vicinity, however, Col. Donelson moved his family that summer across the Cumberland to the safer settlement of Mansker's Station, located on Mansker's Creek, which flows into the Cumberland on the north side of Hadley's Bend, not very far from the DuPont plant.

In November or December of that year (1780), the Donelsons moved to Kentucky, where they lived until 1783, when they decided to return to the Cumberland country and occupy the lands they had selected here. Col. Donelson was on a business trip back to Virginia at the time his family returned to

Tennessee, where he planned to follow them. He never lived to complete the journey, however. On his way back from Kentucky by horseback, he was mysteriously murdered. The true facts of his death have never been determined, and many histories record that he was shot by Indians from ambush. Some suspicion, however, rested on two white men with whom he was traveling.

Sometime around 1790, Capt. John Donelson, son of Col. Donelson and brother of Rachel, built the first of the Donelson houses in the vicinity of Cleveland Hall. Known as Ingleside, it was a log dwelling located between the present village of Hopewell and Lebanon Road, where the house occupied by Mr. Hubert Tuck now stands. In 1810 Captain John built the Mansion, a two-storied house of logs. This house was located within the Hopewell village area and was still standing until destroyed by fire just after the first World War. It was inherited by Capt. Donelson's son, Stockley, grandfather of John Donelson VI. Ingleside went to William Donelson, another of Captain John's sons. Stockley's holdings, adjoining William's, extended to Dupontonia (now Lakewood), and comprised about 2,000 acres. Part of the land later purchased by Andrew Jackson for the Hermitage was included in this tract. Stockley occupied the Mansion until he built Cleveland Hall.



From all indications, Stockley Donelson was his own architect and designed Cleveland Hall himself. No mention of an architect is found in any of the records. Certainly whoever planned it had an eye for graceful proportions as well as for 'practicality.' The house has 18 rooms. The main rooms are 18 feet by 20 feet, with 13-foot ceilings. Not only the outside walls but even the 15-inch-thick partition walls are of brick, which were made on the plantation with slave labor. The house was built in a cotton field, but the proud old cedars that now line the drive were flourishing young trees when the house was completed in 1840. It is thought that Stockley Donelson planned the house long before it was actually built and

planted the cedars in rows in his field so they might be starting their growth. Some of them have died or been blown down in storms, so that many are missing now, but they have been carefully replaced by young cedars. An ancient holly tree stands near the house.

Inside the house, the woodwork is snowy white, except for the polished railing of the graceful stairway. Fireplaces, doors and window casings are simply and beautifully carved. All of the original floors remain, built of smooth, wide hardwood boards. The hallway is distinctive in that it is divided into front and back halves by a partition with a white carved doorway opening into the back portion, where the stairway leads to the upper hall. Another stairway leads to an upstairs bedroom from the nursery on the lower floor.

The parlor opens on the left from the hallway, and just back of the parlor is the dining room with wide doors between which, when opened, throw the two rooms into one. Both parlor and dining room have big fireplaces in the walls opposite the hallway. The thickness of the walls gives a depth to the doorways and windows, adding greatly to their beauty. The windows were all placed just where windows should be, making the rooms well-lighted. The whole effect is one of simplicity, good proportions and excellent taste.



The house is furnished with lovely old furniture, most of it cherished possessions of the family through several generations. Perhaps the most interesting piece is the desk belonging to Col. John Donelson, which was brought down the river from Wautauga on the boats in 1780. It is quite probable that some of his diary was written at this desk. On top of the desk rests his compass.

There is also a little vanity table that was a present from Rachel Jackson to her niece, Emily Donelson, who used it in the White House during the Jackson administration. Rachel Jackson died after General Jackson was elected President, but before he took office, and the General invited Emily and her husband, Maj. A. J. Donelson, to live in Washington with him. Emily, who was the sister of Stockley Donelson, builder of Cleveland Hall, was a gracious and accomplished girl, well suited to her position as mistress of the White House. In the dining room at Cleveland Hall is a chest of drawers presented by General Jackson to Emily's husband, but it is not certain that this piece was used at the White House.



The proud old house has been the scene of many happy gatherings and a number of distinguished persons have been entertained beneath its roof. Three presidents have enjoyed its hospitality: Andrew Jackson, of course, was there a number of times, and Martin Van Buren and James K. Polk have both sat in its gracious parlor and discussed the serious questions of the day with the Donelson men and their neighbors. There were a great many of the Donelson cousins, nieces and nephews, as well as friends among the families of the countryside, and it is easy to imagine the great room filled with young laughter so long ago, and the swish of starched petticoats descending the curved

stairway. There were plenty of slaves on the plantation to "fetch and carry," and the life in the Cumberland country was gracious and leisurely.

At the death of Stockley Donelson, Cleveland Hall passed to his son, William Stockley Donelson, and from him to his son, John Donelson VI, and finally to John Donelson VIII, the present owner.

One hundred and sixty years sit lightly upon this sturdy old house and it is still a most pleasant and comfortable place to live. Its present mistress says, "It is the most practical house I've ever seen." A furnace has been installed, so that the house is well-heated, but a grate fire burns in Mrs. Donelson's sitting room and great logs are laid in the parlor and dining room, to be started at the strike of a match.

The Donelsons do not use the Roman numeral after their names, and it is used here only for purposes of identification. The present master and mistress of Cleveland Hall have two sons and a daughter: John Donelson VII, Leonard Hooper Donelson and Mary Hooper Donelson, who is a rather well-known artist and sculptress. Mary Hooper is the wife of P. T. Jones and she and her husband live at Cleveland Hall with her parents.

John VII also has two sons and a daughter: Agnes Scaright Donelson, John Donelson VIII and William Stockley Donelson.

Mrs. John Donelson VI, the gracious mistress of Cleveland Hall, was before her marriage Miss Betty Hooper and she has a claim in her own right to the rich heritage of the early pioneers. Her great-great-grandfather, Robert Cartwright was one of the party who made the perilous first journey by water from North Carolina, to help establish new frontiers for the young American republic.

Note: The present owners include William Stokley Donelson II, William Stokley Donelson III, David Alexander Donelson, Daniel Andrew Donelson, John Donelson III (VIII) (deceased 2010), Elizabeth Donelson Williams Butler, Mary Hooper Williams Wolfe, Sara McBee Williams Gelling, and James Thomas Williams IV.

The house is located at 4041 Old Hickory Boulevard.