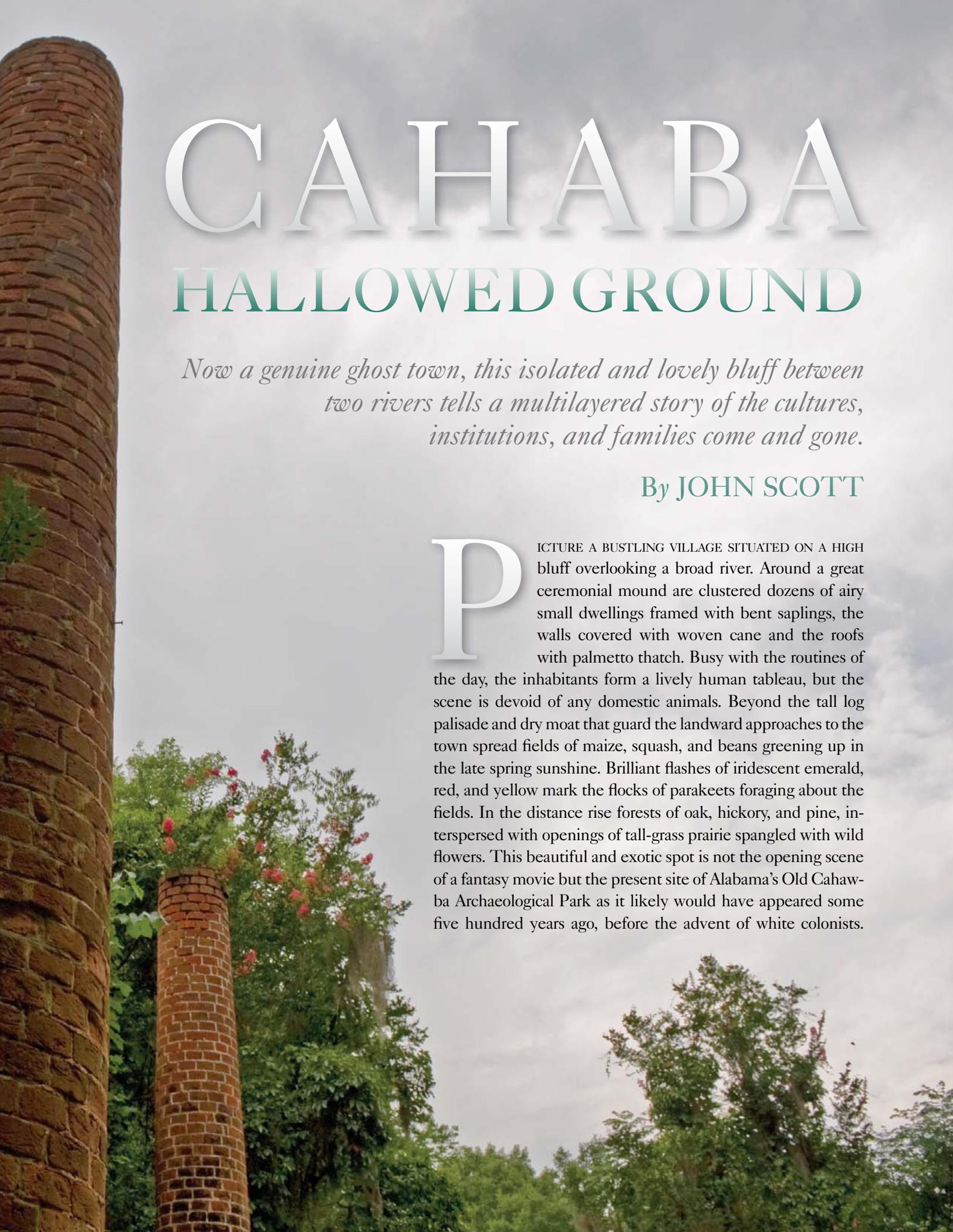




Once part of one of the most elegant mansions in Cahaba, the Crocheron columns have become the former state capital's iconic ruins. (Robin McDonald)



CAHABA

HALLOWED GROUND

Now a genuine ghost town, this isolated and lovely bluff between two rivers tells a multilayered story of the cultures, institutions, and families come and gone.

By JOHN SCOTT

PICTURE A BUSTLING VILLAGE SITUATED ON A HIGH bluff overlooking a broad river. Around a great ceremonial mound are clustered dozens of airy small dwellings framed with bent saplings, the walls covered with woven cane and the roofs with palmetto thatch. Busy with the routines of the day, the inhabitants form a lively human tableau, but the scene is devoid of any domestic animals. Beyond the tall log palisade and dry moat that guard the landward approaches to the town spread fields of maize, squash, and beans greening up in the late spring sunshine. Brilliant flashes of iridescent emerald, red, and yellow mark the flocks of parakeets foraging about the fields. In the distance rise forests of oak, hickory, and pine, interspersed with openings of tall-grass prairie spangled with wild flowers. This beautiful and exotic spot is not the opening scene of a fantasy movie but the present site of Alabama's Old Cahaba Archaeological Park as it likely would have appeared some five hundred years ago, before the advent of white colonists.

Now, move forward to the year 1817. The old Indian village has long since disappeared, with the causes of its demise shrouded in the mists of time. All that remains are the great ceremonial mound and the winding river ever flowing south toward the sea, oblivious to the tide of human events. The governor of the new Alabama Territory climbs the old mound, surveys the scene, and dreams of a vibrant new city on the site.



Above: The state capital at Cahaba incorporated ruins of the native community (which would have been similar to the one depicted here) by turning the site of the moat into roadways. Bibb planned to situate the capital building on the area's central mound. (National Parks Service. Painting by Lloyd Kenneth Townsend.) Left: An early map of the community shows its organization around a grid system. Although the town was originally christened "Cahawba," eventually the "w" was omitted in everyday use. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

UP UNTIL THE TIME that Alabama was admitted to the Union, every state had simply selected an existing town or city for its capital. Our first state capital was set in a wilderness with the hope that a town would grow up around it. This bold experiment was the brainchild of William Wyatt Bibb, Alabama's first governor.

Bibb grew up in the Broad River region of Georgia, entered politics, and at age thirty-two was elected to the U.S. Senate. However, in 1817 he lost a bid for re-election and, with his political future in Georgia doubtful, he looked west to Alabama, which had just become a territory. With a little help from his friends, he secured an appointment from President James Monroe to be the territorial governor of Alabama.

When Bibb took office, the territorial capital was at St. Stephens on the Tombigbee River north of Mobile. As Alabama looked toward statehood, the territorial legislature recognized that a more central location was needed and appointed a commission to select a capital city. The commission recommended Tuscaloosa, but

Bibb bucked this finding and determined to create an entirely new capital town at the confluence of the Cahaba and Alabama Rivers.

In 1819 U.S. Senator Charles Tait of Georgia drafted and steered through Congress an enabling act that authorized the people of the Alabama Territory to adopt a constitution and move towards admission as a state. Tait was a close friend and political ally of William Wyatt Bibb and at his behest included in the enabling act a federal grant of 1,620 acres for "the seat of government" at a location to be determined by the territorial governor. With this authority, Bibb was able to designate

The new town of Cahaba was laid out on the federal grant of 1,620 acres in an orderly grid spanning fourteen blocks by six blocks.



Above: Alabama's first four governors served while the capital was at Cahaba (left to right): William Wyatt Bibb, who oversaw the formation of the state's legislature and supreme court; Thomas Bibb, who completed his brother's term; Israel Pickens, Alabama's first two-term governor; and John Murphy, who saw the capital relocated to Tuscaloosa. (All Alabama Department of Archives and History) Today, the only remaining portion of the Cahaba state house is the cupola gracing the St. James Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Lowndesboro. (Robin McDonald)



his own favored site rather than Tuscaloosa.

In accordance with the enabling act, a convention of forty-four elected delegates from around the Alabama Territory met in Huntsville in the summer of 1819 and adopted a constitution patterned on the federal model. That fall Bibb was elected governor, defeating Marmaduke Williams of Tuscaloosa in a close contest. The north Alabama faction was furious at Bibb's autocratic choice of a capital site but, realizing they had been snookered, accepted the location of the seat of government at his planned new town of Cahaba. They were, however, able to get into the state constitution a provi-

sion that the state legislature was to vote in 1825 on whether the capital would remain there. The culminating step on the path to statehood came on December 14, 1819, when President Monroe signed the bill admitting Alabama as the twenty-second state.

In short order, Bibb's dream capital began to take shape. The new town of Cahaba was laid out on the federal grant of 1,620 acres in an orderly grid spanning fourteen blocks by six blocks and, according to tradition, generally patterned after the street layout of the city of Philadelphia. Completed in the fall of 1820, the

new state capitol building was on a high bluff overlooking the Alabama River. It was a two-story brick structure designed to accommodate the legislature, the office of the governor, and the state administrative offices.

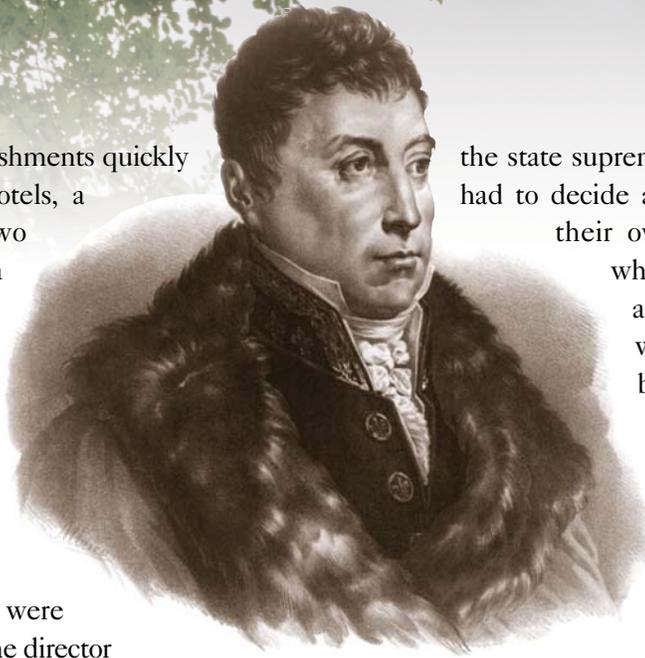
The one-hundred-foot-wide central thoroughfare, Capitol Avenue, started at the capitol grounds and ran westward to the Cahaba River. The other streets were all eighty feet wide with the north-south streets named for trees while the east-west streets were numbered. Each block contained four lots of one-half acre each. Lots were sold at public auction with the proceeds going into the

state treasury. Business establishments quickly sprung up, including two hotels, a theater, two ferries, and two newspapers. The new town was the county seat of Dallas County as well as being the state capital. It was also home to the state bank and the federal land office that handled sales of land in the rich Black Belt that stretched across central Alabama. Most of the residences, however, were log cabins, and Linda Derry, the director of the Old Cahawba Archeological Park, says that the early town “probably looked more like *Gunsmoke* than *Gone with the Wind*.”

Steamboat service began in 1821 when the *Harriett* came up the Alabama River from Mobile. Other steamboats were soon plying the river linking Cahaba not only with Mobile but also with Montgomery and all of the up-country to the head of navigation at Wetumpka.

ALTHOUGH THE CAPITAL REMAINED AT CAHABA for only six years, it was the formative period for all state institutions. During the six years that all three branches of state government were based in Cahaba, the state supreme court met for eleven terms, the legislature met for six sessions, and four different governors presided over the affairs of state. This quick succession of governors began when William Wyatt Bibb died in 1820 after falling from a horse at his plantation in Autauga County. His brother, Thomas Bibb, as president of the state senate, then became acting interim governor. Subsequently, Israel Pickens served two terms, with his successor, John Murphy, taking over during the final year that the capital was at Cahaba.

Of the three branches, the judicial was the most different from what we have today. In those days there were five circuit judges who covered the whole state. These circuit judges meeting together also constituted



The Marquis de Lafayette's visit to Cahaba was a costly one. Although in town for only a single day, the expenses exceeded the cost of building the state house. (Library of Congress)

the state supreme court. In this capacity they had to decide appeals from the decisions of their own colleagues on the court, which must have been awkward at times. They met twice a year, with the first term at Cahaba being in May 1820 and the last in December 1825. The decisions of the supreme court during the years at Cahaba were compiled by Henry Minor, one of the judges, and later published. The lawyers reading this article will probably remember Minor's reports as the oldest and mustiest volume in their libraries.

PROBABLY THE GREATEST SINGLE EVENT IN THE early years of Cahaba was the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette during his triumphal tour of America in 1824–25. By this time aged sixty-seven, the French aristocrat was still revered for his service during the American Revolution a half century earlier.

After a round of receptions, speeches, and balls in Montgomery, Lafayette boarded the steamboat *Henderson* in the early morning hours of April 5, 1825, and proceeded downriver, with a band from the city of New Orleans providing music for the trip. Upon his arrival at Cahaba there was a reception upstairs in the house chamber of the statehouse attended by the state officials and leading men of the town. Then he proceeded to a reception downstairs in the senate chamber attended by the leading ladies of the town. Then there was a dinner at White's Tavern with thirteen formal toasts covering everything from George Washington to the Greeks fighting for their independence from the Ottoman Empire. Then there was an outside barbeque where the ordinary citizens could greet the famous guest. Then Lafayette was escorted to the Halo Lodge for revels with his local brethren in the Masonic Order. Finally, to wind up the day, it was back to the statehouse for a ball, with Lafayette attending until ten o'clock in the evening.

Probably the greatest single event in the early years of Cahaba was the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette during his triumphal tour of America.

By the time he got back on board the *Henderson*, Lafayette must have been totally exhausted but kept up his usual gracious and enthusiastic manner to the end. Considering that he was sixty-seven years old and suffering from gout, this was an amazing demonstration of stamina and will power.

As you can imagine, the expenses were significant. The invoices are preserved at the state archives, and, along with the cost of wine, cigars, fancy food and entertainers, there was an eighteen-dollar expense for burying one of the members of the New Orleans band who was killed in a knife fight. When all of the tabs were in, it was found that the state and the town had spent fifteen thousand dollars on Lafayette's one day at Cahaba. This may not sound like much in current dollars, but when one considers that the entire cost of constructing the statehouse was eleven thousand dollars, it becomes evident that this was a pretty expensive party.



THE ASPECT OF CAHABA'S HISTORY THAT SEEMS most widely known is that the state capital had to be moved, because the whole town was constantly inundated by floods. Back in the 1960s the standard fourth grade textbook on Alabama history was *Know Alabama*, written by three of the state's most admired historians. It described the culminating flood as follows:

In 1825 a terrible flood from the two rivers swept over the town. The water ran through most of the homes and the downtown buildings. The first floor of the capitol was under water. The legislators went to their rooms on the second floor of the building in rowboats. They stepped from the boats in through the windows.

This was the sort of dramatic historical episode that even a child would remember. The only trouble, says Cahaba expert Linda Derry, was that it never happened. Other cities—particularly Montgomery and Tuscaloosa—were still smarting over the location of the capital at

Cahaba's location at the confluence of the Cahaba and Alabama rivers led opponents of the town to publish exaggerated reports of catastrophic floods, eventually leading to the relocation of the capital to Tuscaloosa. (Robin McDonald)

Cahaba, and their newspapers embarked on a sustained campaign of painting the town as frequently under water and chronically racked by yellow fever. The catastrophic flooding painted in the press and spread by rumor never occurred but became so widely believed that when, as mandated by the constitution, the legislature voted in 1825 on a final site for the capital, the opponents of Cahaba were able to muster a one-vote majority approving removal of the capital to Tuscaloosa.

AFTER THE REMOVAL OF THE STATE CAPITAL IN 1826, Cahaba went into a steep decline. As a young man, the famous English naturalist Phillip Henry Gosse served during 1831 as schoolmaster on the Saffold Plantation across the Alabama River from Cahaba. In his classic journal, *Letters from Alabama*, Gosse paints a very dreary picture of the town during this down period: "Cahawba was formerly the seat of government of the state but it is now much decayed, and has a very desolate appearance; a few 'stores,' a lawyer's office or two, and two or three tradesmen's shops." Gosse concluded that the only action in town was at the rum shops, whose verandas were crowded with customers.

However, the town soon began an amazing recovery. It had remained the county seat of Dallas County and became a major shipping port for cotton bound down the Alabama River to Mobile and thence to the mills of Britain and New England. The town reached its zenith in the 1850s with blocks of solid brick commercial buildings and elegant residences. A number of the homes were truly impressive, with the two notable examples being the Crocheron house, overlooking the junction of the two rivers, and the Perine Mansion, said to be the largest private residence in the state. The Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians all had churches. On the scholastic front, there were separate academies for boys and for girls. The leading hotel, Dallas Hall, was advertised as the second-finest in the state.

Every ambitious town wanted to have a railroad connection, and a line from Cahaba up to Marion was completed in 1858. This was an era when the monuments of past native civilizations were deemed of little importance, and the great ceremonial mound that had been the center of the vanished Indian village was used for fill dirt in building the bed of the new railroad. Any regrets over loss of the mound were brushed aside by expectations that the line would soon begin funneling more cotton and trade into Cahaba from the up-country.

The heart of the little city was remarkably compact, with the mercantile district, the professional offices, the hotels and restaurants, the county courthouse, the steamboat landing, the railroad terminus, a bevy of imposing mansions, and the churches all concentrated within a few blocks. A stroll down bustling Vine Street, lined with shops and stores, must have been an exciting experience for the country people on their trips into town. Or, imagine the impressions of a slave from some remote plantation driving a cotton wagon into the metropolis for the first time.

On the eve of the Civil War, Cahaba was the social and commercial center of Dallas County, which was said to have the fourth-highest per capita wealth of any county in the entire United States. The town was riding high.

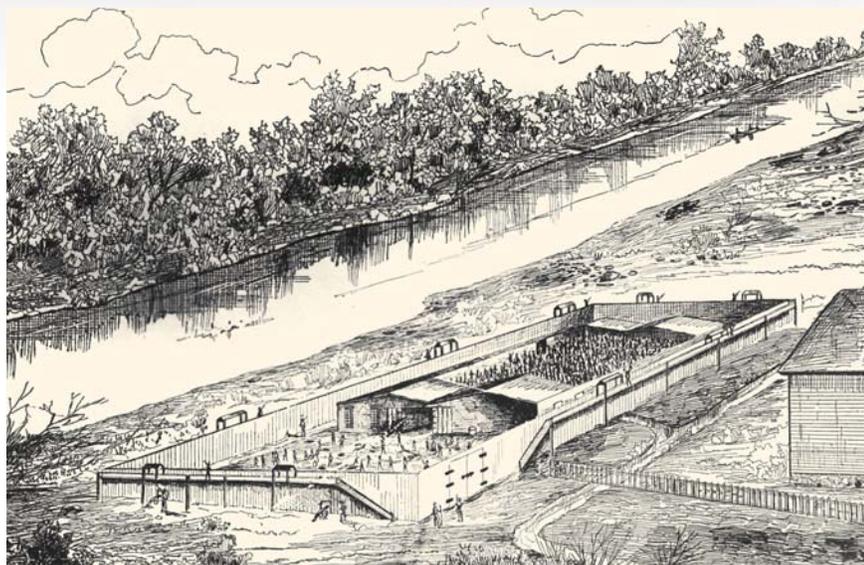


The first Alabama structure to boast air-conditioning, the Perine Mansion was intended as a factory but completed as a palatial home by New York merchant E. M. Perine. (Old Cahawba Archaeological Park, Alabama Historical Commission)

WITH THE OUTBREAK OF THE CIVIL WAR, Cahaba was caught up in the general enthusiasm for the southern cause. The local militia company, known as the Cahaba Rifles, was incorporated into the Fifth Alabama Infantry Regiment as Company F and attached to the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, where it was in the thick of the battles at Seven Pines, Malvern Hill, First Cold Harbor, Boonesboro, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. By the beginning of 1864, the regiment had been so decimated that it is hard to trace the fate of the individual companies. Remnants of the Fifth Alabama continued to serve with the Army of Northern Virginia until the very end, but by the time Lee surrendered at Appomattox only four officers and fifty-three men were left.

In early 1862 Thomas Lewis resigned his commission as a lieutenant in the Cahaba Rifles and returned to Cahaba to organize a cavalry unit known as Lewis's Partisan Rangers. Recruiting was so successful that it grew to five companies and became known as Lewis's Battalion. Attached to the Army of the Tennessee, this hard-riding outfit served at various times under Gens. Nathan Bedford Forrest, John B. Hood, and Alabama's own Joe Wheeler. Thomas Lewis, by then a major, was killed in a skirmish at Lafayette, Georgia, in June 1864, but the battalion continued to bear his name until the end of the war. Like the Cahaba Rifles, the men in Lewis's Battalion saw hard duty, but at least they

During the period of its operation an estimated five thousand captured Union soldiers spent time as inmates at Castle Morgan.



This sketch of the POW camp at Cahaba was rendered by Jesse Hawes, a Union prisoner whose memoir Cahaba: A Story of Captive Boys in Blue recounts his time on the property. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

got to ride rather than walk from one action to the next.

Among the many encounters with ghosts at Cahaba, one of the most famous befell a young couple on a June night in 1862 while they were strolling in the gardens behind the mansion owned by Col. Claudius Pegues, who was at the front serving as commander of the Fifth Alabama. A luminous flashing ball appeared ahead of them and floated almost within arm's length. They were brave and sought to touch it, but the apparition always darted out of reach and eventually disappeared into the surrounding hedges. Soon after, news arrived that about the time the apparition was seen Colonel Pegues had been fatally wounded during the Seven Days Campaign outside Richmond. One can imagine the conclusions that were drawn.

Another casualty of the war was Cahaba's railroad, which the Confederate government appropriated. They used the rails and rolling stock on a line from Selma to Demopolis, deemed of greater military importance.

In June 1863 a fifteen-thousand-square-foot brick cotton warehouse overlooking the Alabama River was surrounded by a wooden stockade and converted into a military prison. Informally christened "Castle Morgan,"

after the legendary Confederate partisan Gen. John Hunt Morgan, this facility was designed to hold no more than five hundred prisoners but soon exceeded that. Then, in August 1864 Lincoln and his field commanders halted the traditional exchange of prisoners, and the Confederate military prisons were swamped with new arrivals. By the end of the war some three thousand Union soldiers were crammed inside Castle Morgan. Although the prisoners were on short rations, beset by lice, and deviled by poor sanitation, the mortality rate of about 3 percent at Castle Morgan was

remarkably low compared to other military prisons in both the South and the North.

During the period of its operation an estimated five thousand captured Union soldiers spent time as inmates at Castle Morgan. With conditions at times so crowded there was hardly room to move, one of the few pleasures was reading. Realizing this, Mrs. Amanda Gardner, whose home was next to the prison, regularly sent books from her fine library to the inmates. The books, along with what food she could spare, were delivered by her young daughter, Belle, through a hole in the stockade wall. Although Mrs. Gardner had lost her oldest son early in the war and was an ardent supporter of the southern cause, her sympathy for the plight of the Union POWs transcended her partisan feelings, and she became the much-beloved guardian angel of the inmates at Castle Morgan.

In 1863 Bell Tavern, once the social center of the town, was converted into a military hospital. In the long rows of white cots lining the old ballroom, sick and wounded Confederate soldiers lay alongside ailing Union prisoners of war from Castle Morgan.

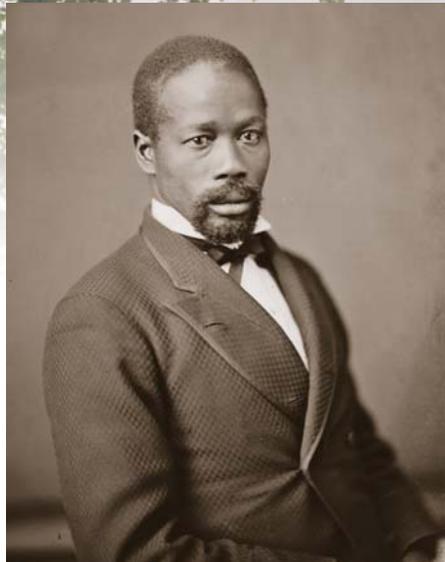
As the war went on, refugees from areas occupied by Union forces or in the path of the fighting sought Cahaba as a safe haven. There are no precise figures, but it is estimated that, by the closing months of the war, the civilian population had swelled to about six thousand. However, towards the end even Dallas County felt the war

first-hand when in April of 1865 a Union cavalry force known as Wilson's Raiders overwhelmed the small Confederate force defending Selma, destroyed the ordinance works, and sacked the town.

AS THE WAR WOUND DOWN most of the federal prisoners at Castle Morgan were transferred to a parole camp in Vicksburg, where they were joined by other POWs from the Confederate military prison at Andersonville, Georgia. The federal authorities then began the task of returning the POWs from Vicksburg to their homes. In addition to the crew and civilian passengers, 2,300 homeward-bound Union soldiers were crammed onto the steamboat *Sultana* that was to transport them up the Mississippi to Cairo, Illinois. The *Sultana* was rated for a maximum total of 376 passengers and crew, so she was dangerously overloaded.

Historian Stephen Ambrose recounts that the owners of the *Sultana* were paid \$5.00 for each Union soldier taken on board. This was big money, and determined to make the most of it, the captain of the *Sultana* gave the Union officers in charge a kickback of \$1.25 for each man placed on board to induce them to pack the *Sultana* to the limit.

At one stop early in the voyage upriver the *Sultana* almost capsized when hundreds of the men rushed to one side of the boat to get in the picture being taken by a photographer on the landing. Then, some eight miles above Memphis at two o'clock in the early morning hours of April 15, 1865, one of the boilers exploded, and two others quickly followed. Some of the passengers and crew were directly killed by the blast. Others were burned to death when the hot coals from the exploding boilers ignited the whole vessel into an inferno with a glare that could be seen miles away in Memphis. The river was in flood, and many more were drowned as the *Sultana* went down. Only 520 were rescued, and 200 of these survivors died soon thereafter of burns and other



After serving in Congress, Jeremiah Haralson held a variety of government positions before heading west to pursue a career in coal mining. (Library of Congress)

injuries. With a loss of 1,600 lives, it was the worst maritime disaster in American history.

The official inquiry concluded that the *Sultana's* boilers had exploded due to a combination of the careening of the overloaded vessel, low water levels in the boilers, and some recent faulty repair work. However, years later, reports surfaced that a diehard Confederate saboteur named Robert Loudon had planted a "coal torpedo" in the fuel supply of the *Sultana*. Essentially a bomb disguised as a large lump of coal, these devices were designed to explode when

shoveled into the boiler of a steam vessel. Like the hulk of the *Sultana*, the true cause of its demise lies buried in the mud at the bottom of the Mississippi River.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT CAHABA, THE END OF the war and the Reconstruction laws brought dramatic social and economic change, with the town basically taken over by the freed slaves. Now empowered to vote and hold office, they became politically active. They used the abandoned county courthouse for gatherings, and during the early years of the Reconstruction era, Cahaba became known as a mecca of the Radical Republican Party. The most successful of the black political activists was Jeremiah Haralson, who served in the Alabama legislature and was later elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the aftermath of the Civil War and with the onset of Reconstruction, most of the white population abandoned Cahaba, and the town went into a final sharp decline. In 1865 a catastrophic flood actually did inundate the whole town. A further blow came when the county seat was moved to Selma in 1866. Many of the houses and commercial buildings at Cahaba were torn down for salvage or were moved into Selma. Within a few years Cahaba was well on the way to becoming a ghost town. At the time of the 1860 census, the town had a

In the aftermath of the Civil War and with the onset of Reconstruction, most of the white population abandoned Cahaba.

population of 720 white residents and 1,200 slaves. By 1870 the population had dropped to 129 whites and 302 “coloreds.” By the time of the 1880 census, Cahaba had ceased to be shown as a town.

Its glory days over, the artifacts of Cahaba became scattered far and wide. For instance, the copper-plated dome of the old statehouse now sits atop the steeple of a Methodist church in Lowndesboro, and the key to the front door of the statehouse reposes in a display case at the Alabama Department of Archives & History.

THERE WAS STILL SOME FIRE IN THE ASHES, however, and new life took hold around the last great estate that had been built at Cahaba. This complex of five imposing brick structures—consisting of the main residence, servant’s quarters, barn, and a two-story privy—had been completed in 1863 by S. A. “Shoestring” Barker, a local entrepreneur. Barker sold his mansion shortly after completion, and in the late 1860s the place was acquired by Samuel McCurdy Kirkpatrick, who made it his family seat.

As the town of Cahaba faded and fell into ruins, the holdings of the Kirkpatrick family waxed into an agricultural fiefdom. From the departing inhabitants of the town the Kirkpatricks acquired more and more land. Around 1890 Samuel Kirkpatrick’s eldest son, Clifton, took over management of the family farming operations. A visionary who preached the gospel of diversified agriculture, Clifton Kirkpatrick later served on the state’s Board of Agriculture and in the state legislature. Standing 6’4”, he was an imposing figure and became known as the “Duke of Cahaba.”

By 1911 the Kirkpatricks had acquired two thousand acres, including the whole northern part of the old town plat and most of the adjoining land within the horseshoe bend of the Cahaba River. By the time the boll weevil arrived in Alabama in 1914, Clifton Kirkpatrick had diversified into purebred hogs, saddle horses, and pecans, and under his guidance “Kirkview Farm” became a model of progressive agriculture.

However, the fortunes of the farm were dogged by periodic floods, disastrous windstorms, and economic upheavals. With the onset of the Great Depression, Clifton Kirkpatrick fell heavily in debt, and after his

death in 1930, the decline in the family’s fortunes rapidly accelerated. The main house was completely destroyed by fire in 1935, and in 1939 all of the Kirkpatrick lands at Cahaba were sold at foreclosure. With the demise of Kirkview Farm, Cahaba truly became a lost world with only a few old buildings and a scattering of fishing shacks along the Alabama River to mark where the proud town had once stood.

AS THE YEARS PASSED, THE FORMER INHABITANTS came to remember the town in its glory days as an Alabama version of Camelot. In 1905, long after the final demise of Cahaba, Anna Gayle Fry wrote a memoir of her girlhood there, and the picture she paints of the town is little short of perfection:

Its social life, the wealth and intellect of its people, the eminence and influence of its men, the beauty and accomplishments of its women and the lordly, generous hospitality of the people at large, combined with the highest cultivation and refinement, gave Cahaba a prominence that was unsurpassed by any place in Alabama, or indeed by any place in the South.

With such a rich history, there were fitful private and public efforts over the years to preserve what was left of Cahaba, but none of these initiatives ever really got off the ground. Finally, in 1975 the site was designated by the legislature as the Old Cahawba Archaeological Park, and management was given to the Alabama Historical Commission. After the very capable Linda Derry came on board as site director in 1986, the commission began efforts to acquire all the land within the old town limits and to make Cahaba a full-fledged historical park. However, funding was never adequate, and many private in-holdings remain. To supplement state support, the Cahaba Foundation was launched in 2008 under the leadership of Daniel J. Meador, a distinguished professor at the University of Virginia Law School and a grandson of old Clifton Kirkpatrick, the Duke of Cahaba.

Under the leadership of Frank White, the current director of the Alabama Historical Commission, support for Cahaba now seems to be coalescing from both the public and private sectors. A new visitor center is in the works, a Cahaba Genealogical Society has been formed,

and general interest has increased dramatically. The headquarters for the park and the Cahaba Foundation are in the former home of Confederate general, U.S. Senator, and one-time Cahaba resident, John Tyler Morgan, at 719 Tremont Street in Selma.

A contributing factor to the renewed interest in Cahaba has been the formation of the Cahawba Genealogical & Historical Society with a special membership category for the descendants of all former residents of the town. This includes the Union POWs held at Castle Morgan, and their descendants seem greatly intrigued by this ancestral connection with Cahaba.



St. Luke's Episcopal Church was returned to Cahaba in 2007, where it is undergoing a meticulous restoration by the Alabama Historical Commission. (Robin McDonald)

into the Trevi Fountain and make a wish, so the visitors at Cahaba do the same at the Perine Well, and the bottom of the basin is covered with small change.

The town cemetery provides an interesting stroll, with many famous Alabama names in evidence. The graves of John R. Bell and his son, John A. Bell, bear witness to the pervasive pride of the old-time citizens of Cahaba. Both were killed in a shootout on Vine Street in May 1856, defending the family honor from accusations of complicity in a series of thefts and arsons by one of their servants.

Like the cemetery, Vine Street, the principal commercial thoroughfare of Cahaba in its glory

THIS BRINGS US TO THE QUESTION OF WHAT there is to see at Cahaba today. One of the most interesting sights at Cahaba arises out of its geology. Like much of the West Alabama Black Belt, Cahaba is underlain by a thick stratum of Selma chalk. Beneath this formation there is an aquifer under such pressure that when tapped, it forces a strong stream of water up through the hundreds of feet of chalk. During the heyday of Cahaba, there were about eighty such overflowing wells, which provided the town with an excellent supply of drinking water. Many of the shallower wells have ceased to flow, because the aquifer has now been tapped for catfish ponds and other agricultural uses. However, a few of the deepest wells are still going strong.

The most famous of these wells served the Perine Mansion. When drilled in 1853 it was, at 753 feet, the deepest known well in the world and had a flow of over 1,200 gallons a minute. Its fame was such that in 1856, U.S. President Millard Fillmore paid a visit to Cahaba to see it. The Perine Mansion is now long gone, but the well continues to flow, bubbling up into a round masonry basin and creating a sizable stream that meanders off into the woods. Just as the people of Rome toss coins

days, is a well-marked graveyard of the businesses that once thrived there, with sunken pits evidencing where the cellars had been. There are also nature trails through the moss-hung woods along Clear Creek.

Probably the most elegant residence in Cahaba was the Crocheron House. Situated on a high bluff at the confluence of the Cahaba and Alabama Rivers, it was the home of R. C. Crocheron, a merchant prince whose family shipping interests extended from Cahaba to New York. The house survived far longer than most structures in Cahaba but finally burned down in 1920. Most of the bricks were salvaged and sold, but those in the columns on the side portico were rounded and thus useless for ordinary building purposes. So the soaring columns that once graced the Crocheron house have survived and are now the hallmark ruins of the park.

At the other end of town, there remains intact an imposing brick, two-story residence with stately columns across the front. First-time visitors always think that it is a classic old plantation house, until they read the historical marker and find that it was actually the servants' quarters of the Kirkpatrick house.

During the flush times at Cahaba, another of the landmarks was St. Luke's Episcopal Church, located near

Along with preservation of the old town site, there have been efforts to preserve the surrounding countryside.



Cahaba's picturesque cemetery is the final resting place of prominent early citizens like John A. Bell, killed along with his father in a Vine Street shootout in 1856. (Robin McDonald)

the town center. It was a beautiful frame structure in the Upjohn style and built of cypress. After the final decline of Cahaba, it was dismantled and moved to nearby Martin Station, where it was used by a black congregation for many years and then abandoned. The old bell tower has been lost, but in 2007 the main church building was again dismantled and moved back to Cahaba, where it is now being faithfully restored by the Alabama Historical Commission.

Along with preservation of the old town site, there have been efforts to preserve the surrounding countryside. In 2008 the Nature Conservancy purchased a 3,000-acre tract bordering the state park on the west. This crucial acquisition protects from development the approaches to the park and two miles of frontage on the Cahaba River. It also preserves some of the last remnants of the Black Belt prairies that once covered a thousand

square miles in central Alabama. As planned, this tract has now been purchased from the Nature Conservancy by the state's Forever Wild Land Trust and will be managed by the Department of Conservation as a permanent natural preserve.

As a joint project, the Department of Conservation and the Nature Conservancy are seeking to restore the prairies on the site to their original natural state, which was almost identical to the legendary tall-grass prairies of the Great Plains, with the same native grasses, wild flowers, insects, and birds. An open tall-grass prairie in full flower is a memorable sight, and when fully restored the prairies at Cahaba should add much to the appeal of the park and its environs.

Along with the prairies, the Cahaba River is also a biological treasure house. Flowing 190 miles from its headwaters above Birmingham to its confluence with the Alabama, the Cahaba is the only major free-flowing river remaining in our state and also the most biologically diverse. A feature article in the August 2009 issue of *Smithsonian Magazine* states that the Cahaba has more different fish species than any other river its size in the United States. The 135 species include everything from hefty large-mouth bass to a tiny catfish named the freckle-bellied mad tom. The Cahaba is also rich in turtles, muskels, and aquatic snails.

STANDING BETWEEN ITS TWO RIVERS, ONE CAN almost feel how heavy the human history at Cahaba lies upon the land. Here, all of the conflicting elements of the Alabama story seem to have intersected. The place has witnessed the full measure of individual joy and suffering, of vaulting ambitions and dashed hopes, of economic success and utter ruin, of social pride and corresponding humiliation. It has seen the rise and fall of the old planter society, the trauma of the Civil War, the advent of a new social order, and the passing of the traditional agricultural economy.

Does such a weight of history lend an ambience to the land that lingers long after the physical monuments are gone and the players have passed on? And does the story of such a place resonate with us and touch something universal in our nature? If so, then the site of old Cahaba is indeed hallowed ground.

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