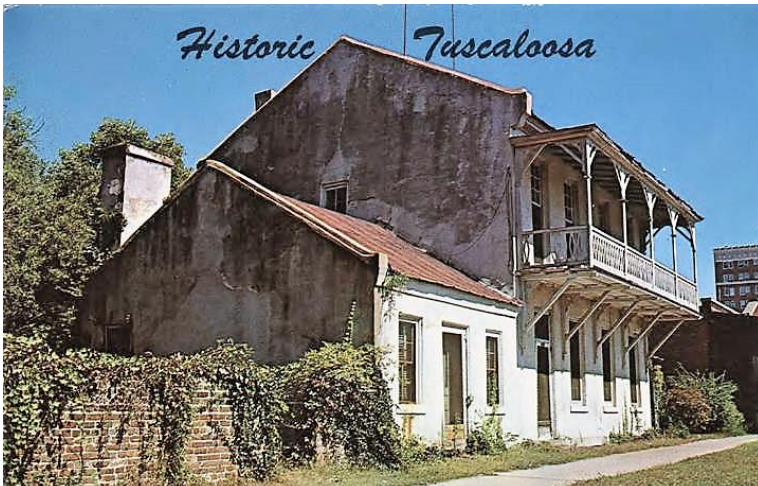


The Old Tavern



The early history of the Old Tavern is obscure. It was reputedly built circa 1827, for William Dunton, an early Tuscaloosa innkeeper. The structure was originally located at 2512 Broad Street, now University Blvd., on the north side, approximately 50 feet west of 25th Avenue, where the bridge now connects Tuscaloosa and Northport. It consisted of a main two-story



brick structure with a full basement above grade in the rear. A one-story brick structure adjoined the building on the west side. The exterior was stuccoed and scored to simulate ashlar. The second story balcony which overhung the sidewalk was probably a late 19th century replacement of an earlier one. The sight of the building, with its gable roof with raked parapets, and the overhanging balcony gave it a

similarity to buildings in Mobile and New Orleans and led to one of its most popular names: the Old French Tavern.

Through the years, in addition to Old French Tavern, the building has known by many different names, including: the Spanish House, Wilson House, the French House, and Ewing's Tavern. It was incorrectly listed in the Historic American Building Survey in the 1930's as Duffie's Tavern.

The interior of the building consisted of a side hall with a large front room and smaller chambers to the rear, with kitchen and service areas in the basement.

The Old Tavern has served many roles in its almost 200-year life. It's served as a tavern, an inn, a stagecoach stop, a Governor's home, a private residence, and has seen troops from the Civil War through World War II.

When the Tuscaloosa County Preservation Society moved the Old Tavern from its original site to Capitol Park in 1968, the masonry walls were dismantled and reconstructed on the new site using the original brick veneered on wood stud construction. The interior woodwork was preserved, but plaster was replaced with gypsum wall board. Other modifications include the elimination of the original basement kitchen and side wing, rear porches, and the exterior stucco wallcovering.



The Main Hall



The Main Hall is arranged as it might have been seen by a traveler in the early to mid-19th century. This is where meals would have been served and conversation with other travelers would have taken place. The cost of one meal would have been included in the nightly rate, other meals could have been purchased as well. The side table to the left features a large hand carved bowl and serving utensils that would have been used at the time. The photograph above the table is of Taylor Robinson (1874-1960) who was a resident of the Tavern from 1900-1930. He is pictured with his fiddle. It was not uncommon for people to have prized possessions in their pictures, as they were rare at the time.

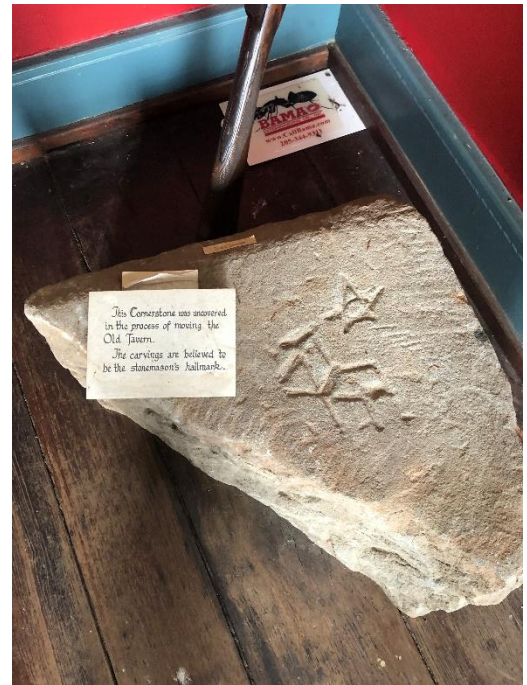


The desk bookcase would not have been an uncommon site in taverns at the time. As entertainment would not have consisted of tv's, radios, or phones, instead books, instruments and conversation would have been the forms of entertainment for travelers and guest.



The stone at the end of the desk bookcase is believed to be the original cornerstone from the Tavern's original site. The carvings are also believed to be Masonic symbols etched into the stone to ensure a sound building.

The two maps of early Alabama on the wall give a great explanation of why Tuscaloosa is located where it is and how we became the Capitol of the State from 1826-1846. Alabama has had 5 capitols in its 200-year history. The first was in St. Stephen's when we were a territory, then in Huntsville during the constitutional convention, next Cahaba was then chosen as it was more centrally located. It was then moved to Tuscaloosa as Cahaba often flooded and was full of mosquitoes. The next stop was



Tuscaloosa as we were the northern most port on the river system, which served as the interstate system of its day. The last move occurred when it was moved to Montgomery. Tuscaloosa was the northern most port on the river system and became a hub for travel north and south in the state. Before the Black Warrior River was dammed, a shoal prevented any further movement on the river. Many letters from early Tuscaloosa discuss the sound of the shoals at night.



Around the fireplace you will find a foot warmer, butter churns, and a broom that would have swept coals back into the fireplace area. Above the mantle is a portrait of Governor John Gayle, who called the Tavern home as he was waiting for what is now the University Club to be completed.

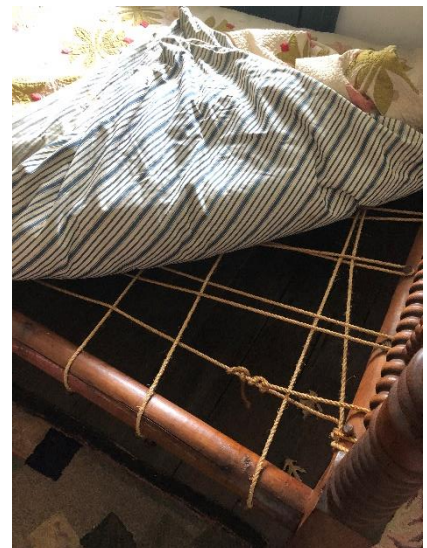


The Guest Room



This room is set in the way that the tavern guest room would have been arranged in the 19th century. Men could travel alone, while all women and children would have needed an escort to travel with. Beds were typically rented by the half, so if you were alone you never knew who you might be sleeping next too. You will notice that all of the furniture is very low to the ground compared to today's furniture. The reason for this is people were much smaller in the 19th century compared to people of today. Notice how small the ladies dress is and the shoe displayed on the travelling chest.

Taking a closer look at the beds, if you pull back the quilt you will see what a mattress would have looked like. When new, the inside would have been filled with down feathers. Once that was worn out and too flat, people would have used what was local, such as pine straw or Spanish moss, both of which are filled with itchy insects. This is where we get the saying, "Don't let the bed bugs bite". Under the mattress you will see that each mattress was held up by ropes. Each night, one would make sure the ropes were pulled nice and tight so that they would not sink down in the middle of the night. And once we put this and the mattress together, we get "Sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite".





Next, looking by each bed you will see a bowl with a pitcher. This was the daily washing station for when you awoke each morning. A simple splash of the face and rinse of the hands and you were ready for the day. Under each bed would have been a chamber pot. Since indoor plumbing was still years in the future, this pot was used to relieve oneself during the night so you did not have to go all the way down the stairs and out to the outhouse.

The windows served two purposes. The first is they acted as the air conditioner unit for the tavern. The middle third of the window opens upwards and the bottom third featured little doors that swung open into the room. This ventilated the hot air in the house up and out to help keep the tavern cooler during the summer months. They also served as doorways that led out on the porch. You will notice that it is a short doorway by today's standards, but the average height of a full-grown man in the 19th century was only 5 feet 4 inches. Ladies were a couple of inches shorter.



The Gathering Room



This room is distinct in that it could double as a meeting room for guests or could be converted into more sleeping spaces as well. This was most likely a sleeping area when Tuscaloosa was the capitol, as this allowed the innkeeper to increase his profits. Around this room you will find many interesting objects. The desk against the back wall typical of what a wealthy gentleman, innkeeper, or another businessman would have had to keep up with everything that goes along with running a successful business. This is a far cry from the small laptops that many people use today. Notice all the different compartments that allowed one to store and keep all the paperwork sorted and filled. There are also multiple spots for the owner to lock away important documents to keep them safe. The small desk next to it is a desk that was used by legislatures while Tuscaloosa was the capitol from 1826-1846. The photograph above is of the state capitol when it was here in Tuscaloosa. Popular myth in Tuscaloosa is that it was burned during the Civil War, but it was actually lost to an electrical fire in the 1920's.

The desk to the right belonged William Wyatt Bibb the first governor of Alabama. The map above it is another map of Tuscaloosa from 1887 done by the Tuscaloosa Coal, Iron, and Land Company. Tuscaloosa was referred to as "the Pittsburg of the South" due to the amount of coal and other natural resources to produce iron. This is one of the reasons why Tannehill Iron Works was so vital during the Civil War. It was not until after the war and during late Reconstruction that Birmingham sprung up and took on the nickname.



Questions:

- 1) When and who built the Old Tavern?
- 2) What is another name for the Old Tavern?
- 3) When was the Old Tavern moved to its current location?
- 4) What is the time period of the Main Hall?
- 5) Who is in the photograph above the table?
- 6) What kind of entertainment was used in the Old Tavern?
- 7) What are all of Alabama's capitols?
- 8) What Governor called the Old Tavern home?
- 9) How were the beds rented?
- 10) Why is the furniture so small?
- 11) What are the two purposes for the windows over the balcony?
- 12) Whose desk is in the Gathering Room?
- 13) How was the Old Capitol destroyed?
- 14) Why was Tuscaloosa called "the Pittsburg of the South"?