



ANN MOSS BETTS

Times Past

W. Nashville history still lives in book

WEST NASHVILLE — When an excellent, 400-page book can be written about just one part of a town, maybe it's really time to call the town a city.

That task was accomplished a few months ago by Sarah Foster Kelley, author of *West Nashville: Its People and Environs*. And if this column concerning the book seems tardy, it's because the history-genealogy presented by Kelley, a 10th-generation West Nashvillian, is so complete, it takes a while to take it all in, and do it justice.

West Nashville is a great "browsing" book. Dip into it, and you're likely to come up with the beginnings of Cohn High School, the ancestral history of Gen. James Robertson, or the story of an old log cabin, still remembered by many West Nashvillians.

There are at least three interesting things about that dogtrot cabin, which stood, in the early 1800s, at the present 3307 Charlotte Pike.

First, the cabin served as the first tollgate on the old Nashville-Charlotte Turnpike, which was begun in 1837. The cabin — and its gate, against which youngsters liked to measure their height, when no traffic was coming — continued in its official capacity until discontinuation of the tollgate in 1889.

Second, the cabin was, for most of that century, the home of two related families named Dungey and Rawlings, whose first known member, James Dungey, belonged to a group of citizens which, though small in early 19th century Nashville, made their presence felt in commerce, crafts, and civic work like tending tollgates. Dungey was a free black man.

The third interesting thing about that cabin, which would absolutely bulge with history if it still stood, is that just before the Battle of Nashville, Confederate General John (Old Jawn) Hood himself is said to have provided an escort to safety for its residents, along with a promise to protect their property for just as long as he could.

Old Jawn was as good as his word, but he had a curious-sounding method of protection: he stationed "John the Baptist" in front of the cabin's window.

Instead of a missionary who converted Yankees, "John" was one of many cannon Confederates placed along old Charlotte Pike, thinking that's where the main fighting would take place.

It didn't. The cabin stood safely for almost another century, and James Dungey's descendants went on measuring themselves on the tollgate. In 1954, the cabin was sold and dismantled, ending a long and unique era on Charlotte Pike.

Kelley gives much more information about the tollgate cabin, but while you're "browsing," don't miss the little Civil War story which is "dropped" into a longer one about the home of Col. Matthew Barrow, the Davidson County register of deeds.

Barrow and his wife, Patsy, lived "in great elegance" in a three-story hilltop mansion between Charlotte Pike and Clifton Avenue, Kelley writes.

Elegance began to wither as soon as Union soldiers cut the Barrows' hackberry trees for breastworks, and died altogether when the mansion itself was seized for a lookout. By the time it became a hospital, only a whiff of elegance remained, like the scent of remembered cologne.

But it is at this point that Kelley records one of those "little" stories that make browsing so rewarding.

A Union soldier was brought to the mansion-hospital, a casualty of the Battle of Stones River — sort of.

Six feet, six inches tall and part American Indian, Jim Blythe had been sitting around a campfire with his buddies wishing for some roasted corn; there was a cornfield in sight, just across Stones River.

For whatever reason — surely not his ability to "make himself small" — Blythe was picked to swim across and bring back a sackfull. He almost made it.

Swimming back across the river with his full sack, Jim took a Confederate bullet in the head and was sent, unconscious, to the West Nashville hospital — the Barrow home.

Federal surgeons inserted a silver dime over the wound, and Jim got well, writes Kelley. What's more, he "married a Southern girl, lived to be 94 years old, never wore glasses," and has descendants living in West Nashville to this very day.

As for the Barrow mansion, Kelley writes that it stood empty for many years. Then, in 1878, during "the great yellow fever epidemic," the city converted it into "an isolation hospital."

Many people died there, leaving the old house with a grisly, ghostly reputation. "Stories have been told that some of the bodies were buried in the big cistern in the rear of the kitchen and were covered with rock and dirt."

With a history like that, you'd think the mansion would have been left on its hill to crumble — the sooner the better. But the big, old house had even more lives to live.

Restored at the turn of the century, it was for several years the country home of a Confederate hero, Capt. Thomas Maddin Stegar, who had become president of the Nashville Railway and Light Co.

So the battered old ghost of a house, restored to splendor, went down in history as the first house in Nashville to have electric lights.

Kelley writes that West Nashvillians later called the house the "Stegar Brick," or the "Sticker Brick" and, like generations before them, told tales of its "eerie echoes."

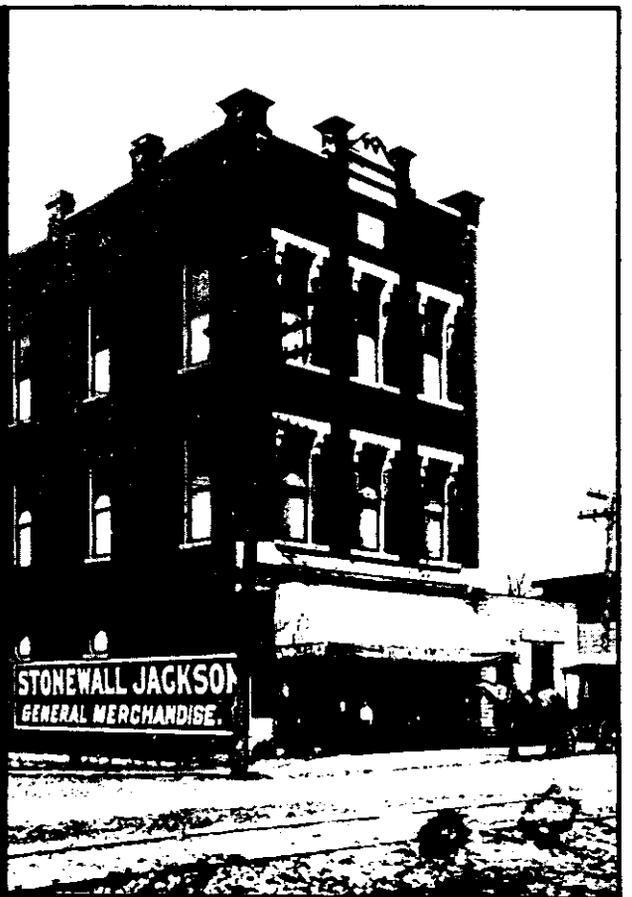
Marked by war and plague but remembered as a mansion of light, the old home went up in flames around 1920. An irreplaceable West Nashville era went with it.

Sarah Kelley has recorded these wondrous tales and many more, plus the genealogies of virtually all West Nashville's longtime families, in *West Nashville: Its People and Environs*, available at local bookstores at \$39.95. ■

Jim Blythe m. Rowena Scott
 Sally Blythe m. James Vanatta
 John Blythe m. William Bond Johnson
 Bessie Johnson m. David J. Redman

West Nashville

its people and environs



by Sarah Foster Kelley

"Matthew Barrow 3 story Mansion on a Steep Hill on 31st + Charlotte Ave was taken over by the Union Army when they reached Nashville after victory at Fort Donelson. It was used as a *look out on a Hospital. Great grandfather Jim Blythe was taken there when he was shot*

The greatly travelled Nashville-Charlotte Turnpike was a route used by emigrants moving westward, and it was second in importance in Nashville. A man of note who lived over a mile out this road was Colonel Matthew Barrow,³³ who served as registrar of deeds at the Davidson County Courthouse.³⁴ In 1811 he purchased one hundred, forty-one acres of land from his father-in-law, John Childress, which bordered John Cockrill's preemption grant and Joseph Elliston's line.³⁵ Other acreage was later purchased but Matthew first lived in a two-story log and frame house opposite Barrow's Hill.³⁶ In later years he built a fine brick mansion atop the steep hill back of present Thirty-first and Charlotte Avenues, the same hill that carried his name. Mr. Barrow's slaves made the brick on the site of the old railroad shops which were used in the construction of the home. The Barrow place, a farm consisting of from five to six hundred acres on both sides of the turnpike, was a country home built in 1834,³⁷ during the Greek revival era of architecture. It served as the residence of its owner until his death in 1855. The Barrow estate reached from Twenty-sixth and Charlotte Avenues westward for approximately one mile.

in head at Stone River.

Matthew Barrow was born in 1784 in Greene County, North Carolina, probably the son of James Barrow of that state, and was a relative of Wylie Barrow of Nashville. He married on July 3, 1808 to Patsy Childress, the daughter of John Childress and his second wife, the former Nancy Ann Hickman, who were early residents of this section.³⁸ Matthew and Patsy (Childress) Barrow lived in great elegance for over twenty years atop the loftiest hill in the rugged ridge between Charlotte Pike and Clifton Avenue. The three-story, seventeen room mansion had sturdy, brick walls, a slate roof and a wide porch, roofed and banistered, which ran along the entire front of the building as well as on the east side. The roof sloped inwardly from the eaves of the four sides forming a truncated pyramid, commonly known as a widow's walk, and the upper base was a platform twenty-five feet square. It was reached by a stair from the third floor. The house faced south toward the Charlotte Pike and windows of the big, airy rooms were six feet in width. The paneled walls of the broad halls on each floor, the circular stairway rising in the halls from the first floor to the third, and the massive paneled door of the front entrance were all of carved oak except the upper panels of the door were of art glass.³⁹ The ceilings were very high, the rooms quite spacious measuring about twenty feet square. The top floor contained an attic. The walls in the main house were spotlessly



Matthew Barrow
 painted by Ralph E. W. Earl
 Courtesy of Mrs. Roy Avery



Patsy Childress Barrow
 painted by Washington Cooper
 Courtesy of Mrs. Roy Avery

³⁶Hugh Walker, "Old Landmarks Recalled, West Nashville Reaches to the River," *The Tennessean*, January 22, 1976, p. 18.
³⁷Ada Scott Rice, "Nashville Old Time Mansions," *The Nashville American*, January 31, 1904, p. 17.
³⁸William Barrow Floyd, *The Barrow Family of Old Louisiana*, (Lexington: Published by the author, 1963), p. 76-77.
³⁹B. Y. Dewitt, "A Bullet Laid Ghost," *The Nashville Tennessean*, Magazine dated February 8, 1948.

white, and the floors were hardwood and waxed very smooth and slick.

The entrance to the property was on Charlotte Pike and two circular roads met at the front gate of the mansion. The entry was later referred to as Stegar Lane. A cedar fence lined with flower beds surrounded the house. Slave quarters, barns, stables and a corn crib were located west of the house. Mrs. Matthew Barrow was often driven to town in their handsome carriage, manufactured by Brewster of Connecticut. The driver no doubt was their young slave, Jeff Lytton, who later became a podiatrist serving the prominent Nashville homes. The carriage was lined in blue, and was said to have been the mate of the one owned by General Andrew Jackson while he was President of the United States. President Jackson had been shown two carriages, one lined in red and one in blue. He chose the red color because it was his wife's favorite. The blue-lined carriage had then been purchased by Matthew Barrow.⁴⁰ A granddaughter who had played in the carriage house at Barrow's Hill when she was a small girl recalled the exquisite coach.

The splendid portrait of Matthew Barrow was painted by the famous Ralph E. W. Earl who also painted the likeness of Andrew Jackson. Mrs. Barrow's portrait was painted by the noted artist, Washington B. Cooper.⁴¹ The widow of Matthew Barrow lived nearly twenty years after her husband. She died in 1872. Her grandson, Captain M. B. Pilcher, lived in the homeplace for a number of years. There were five Barrow children: Nancy Barrow who married Meritt S. Pilcher; James Barrow who married Selena _____; John Childress Barrow who married Elizabeth Loftin; Matthew Barrow, Junior who was unmarried; and Martha Louise Barrow who married Granville C. Torbitt.

During the war between the states the Confederate soldiers came to Barrow's Hill and cut down all the hackberry trees to build breastworks in the defense of Nashville. After the Federal armies occupied the city in February, 1862, they did seize the property of the Barrow home because of its great elevation and consequent range of view. It was used as a lookout and signal station until the close of the war.

The same mansion was used as a Federal hospital during the Civil War. A Yankee soldier who later married a Southern girl was injured during this time and was taken to the Barrow home for treatment. His name was James B. "Jim" Blythe, the son of Moses, who served in Company A of the Fifth Tennessee Cavalry. The private was six foot, six inches tall and was part Indian. He was engaged in the Battle of Stones River and was sitting around a campfire with his associates. When the men decided they wanted to roast some corn, young Jim Blythe was chosen to swim the river to a cornfield on the opposite side. He had filled his sack and was on his way back when the Confederates shot him in the head. The unconscious boy was taken to the old Barrow home where surgery was performed on his head. A silver dime was placed in his skull over the wound. And Jim Blythe got well, married Miss Rowena Scott and raised a family in Nashville. He lived to be ninety-four years old and never wore glasses. His daughter, Sally Jane Blythe, married Jahue Vanatta, a Scotch-Irish farmer, who came to America during the potato famine and settled in Ohio. The Vanattas came to Tennessee by covered wagon with their Uncle Arthur Clayburn. But their daughter, Nola Bessie Vanatta, married William Basil Johnson and became the parents of Mrs. Bessie Johnson Redmond, who lives in West Nashville today.

The old mansion remained empty after the war until 1878, the year of the great yellow fever epidemic in the United States. As the plague spread across the South, terrified people moved northward and many refugees crowded into Nashville. The city converted the old Barrow Hill mansion into an isolation hospital where twenty-four cases of yellow fever were treated. After the epidemic passed, the vacant house was referred to as being haunted, the reason probably being that many of the sick people actually died in the house. Stories have been told that some of the bodies were buried in the big cistern in the rear of the kitchen and were covered with rock and dirt.

⁴⁰Helen Barrow Read, (Mrs. W. W. Read of Brooklyn, New York), the granddaughter of Matthew Barrow; statement dated 1945 and furnished by Mrs. Roy Avery to this writer.

⁴¹Mrs. Roy Avery's Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Box 19, Negatives 33 and 34, contains photographs of the portraits; permission granted by Mrs. Avery in writing.