

# MOUNT LOCUST

ON THE OLD NATCHEZ TRACE





*Published by*

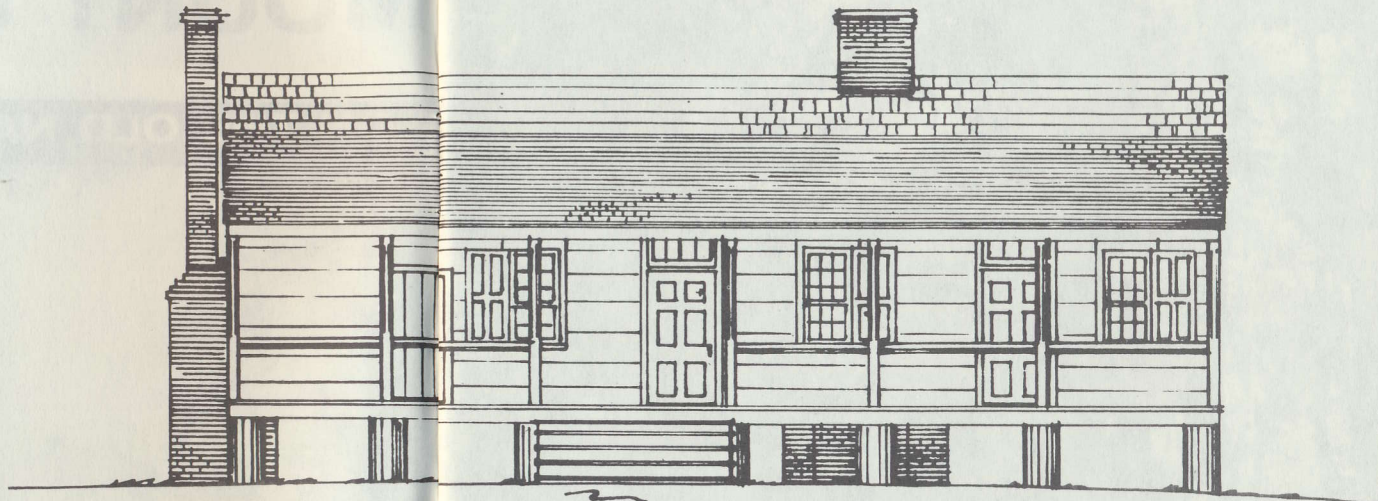
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*Cover*

MOUNT LOCUST  
ON THE OLD NATCHEZ TRACE



*Mount Locust*

This structure, one of the oldest in Mississippi, originated about 1780 as a one-room cabin erected to fulfill the conditions of a land grant made by the government of the British colony of West Florida. It grew by successive additions until, at the time of the Civil War, it had become the rambling seven-room home of a farm family, and as such survived into the 20th century.

In 1956 it was restored as nearly as possible to its condition as a frontier home of the 1820's. Then it was not only a home, but also an inn catering to travelers on the old Natchez Trace.



## NATCHEZ TRACE . . .

busiest road of the Old Southwest during the first years of the 19th century. Even before 1800 the white man was already converting this ancient Indian trail to his own use. After the American Revolution, pioneer settlers of the Ohio Valley carried their produce of farm and forest down the Mississippi in flat-boats to either Natchez or New Orleans to exchange for Spanish gold. These men, called “Kaintucks,” were unwilling to row upstream against the river current. Instead they followed the Trace northward to Nashville and then proceeded on to their homes in the Ohio Valley. Some rode horses bought in Natchez, but most walked.

From these beginnings river traffic grew rapidly. The simple boatmen gave way to the professional boatmen. Mark Twain describes the antics of these boisterous, pugnacious, excitable, and picturesque men in his *Life on the Mississippi*. They also chose to return via the Trace until the coming of the steamboat.

This northbound traffic continued to grow in volume after Mississippi Territory was organized in 1798. Soon thereafter south- or Natchez-bound travelers, post riders, soldiers, itinerant preachers began to use the Trace. Consequently, inns, often called stands or “houses of entertainment,” sprang up in the wilderness along the roadside—places with lusty frontier names like Sheboss, Buzzard Roost, French Camp, and Old Factor’s. Of more than 50 primitive hostelries established before 1820, Mount Locust is the sole survivor.

Not far from Mount Locust the Old Natchez Trace is a sunken road, worn deep into the soil.

## EARLIEST STANDS

The first travelers on the Natchez Trace found no stands to provide food, drink, or shelter. However, they did occasionally see the crude home of an adventurous pioneer who had settled along this historic thoroughfare. Among these were John McIntosh who lived not far from present-day Houston, Mississippi. His father, in 1764, came to live among the Chickasaw as a representative of the British Government. Some 50 miles southward on Pigeon Roost Creek was the crude home of David Folsom, an adventurous New Englander who, long before 1800, settled as a trader among the Choctaw. Near both Natchez and Nashville stood the cabin homes of many men who were pushing back the frontier between the Lower Mississippi and Cumberland Rivers—eastward from Natchez and southward from Nashville.

These men did not intend to open inns. But day after day, tired and hungry and sometimes sick men came to their doors, and the dwellers along the Trace could not turn them away. In self-defense, they had to become standkeepers.

The operators of stands frequently were white men who had lived among the Indians for many years and had Indian wives. Such men were William Doak, Noah Wall, Darius Hamilton, Turner Brashears, Noble Osburn and Levi Kemp. Other stands were operated by halfbreeds such as George Colbert, Louis Lefleur, and John McLish. Most of the stands—perhaps all of them—were located on farms or plantations where food for both men and horses was produced. In some cases the stands were large establishments with many slaves.

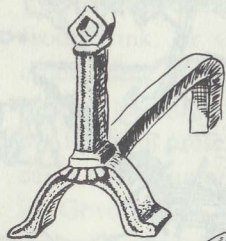
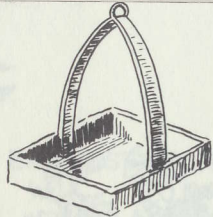


*Typical Frontier Stand Scene.*

## FRONTIER ACCOMMODATIONS

The fare was rough and sleeping arrangements were primitive at the early stands. Even so, most travelers seem to have been satisfied with their accommodations. But some felt otherwise. A Methodist circuit rider who traveled the Trace in 1810 reported: "We were always treated respectfully, and sometimes in their rude manner with cordial hospitality and kindness by the Indians . . . The greatest rudeness we witnessed was in the white men we met at the taverns or stands."

Other travelers reported good treatment at Folsom's, George Colbert's, Young Factor's, Old Factor's, and other places.



THE subscriber informs his friends and the public that he has opened a

*House of Entertainment,*

At Union Town, in the House formerly occupied as a Store-House by Ferguson & Woolley, where he has on hand, and will constantly keep, a full and general supply of necessaries for the accommodation of travellers:—he is provided with good Stables and provender for horses—and hopes by his attention to the business, to merit a share of the public patronage.

Z. MANGUM.

Union Town, October 15. 42—3

*There was enough business at Union Town in 1807 to support two inns. Ad in Mississippi Herald and Natchez Gazette, October 21, 1807.*

The Rev. Thomas Nixon, who rode over the Trace in 1816, complained that “The Indian hotels are made of small poles, just high enough for you to stand straight in, with a dirt floor, no bedding of any kind, except a bearskin, and not that in some of their huts. You feel blank and disappointed when you walk in and find a cold dirt floor, naked walls, and no fire. Camping out is far better than such accommodations.”

**DEVELOPMENT OF INNS**

During the first twenty years of the 19th century when the Trace was a significant national road, the quality of travel accommodations gradually improved. The primitive stands of the early days gave way to better equipped hostelries.

With few exceptions the stands were located on Indian lands. As these lands were opened to settlement, towns were established. Inns such as the Washington Hotel at the “Sign of the Spread

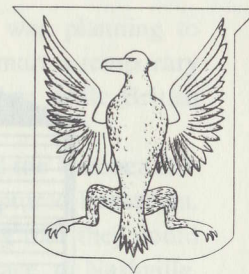


*Meadvilla was the Washington Hotel from 1808 to 1817. Located at Washington, Mississippi, it displayed the “Sign of the Spread Eagle.”*

Eagle” in Washington, the “Sign of the Black Horse” in Selsertown, or “Travelers Repose” in Greenville, began to operate and offered more than food or shelter. Inn-keepers by advertisements, assured prospective patrons of good food, beds, well stocked tap rooms, and occasionally the services of a blacksmith.

As a matter of fact, by the end of the second decade as a national road the Trace had lost its wilderness character. The traveler found about the same quality of accommodations as were available elsewhere in the West.

Mount Locust shared in this development. Its facilities were improved and expanded. By the time the Trace had become a post road, what was once a stand was offering accommodations similar to those provided in Natchez. Mount Locust ceased to be a stand and became an inn.

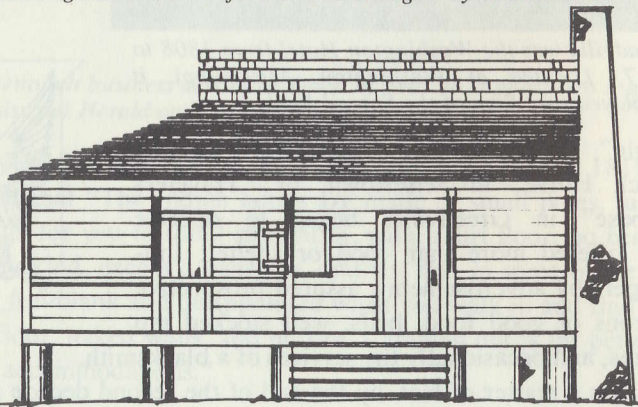


## THE BEGINNINGS OF MOUNT LOCUST

In 1779 the British Government of West Florida first granted to Thomas Harmon the land on which the house stands. Shortly thereafter Harmon transferred the property to Swiss-born John Blommart. Presumably, Blommart began construction of the older, central part of the house to meet the conditions of the grant—the erection of “one good Dwelling House to contain at least twenty feet in length, sixteen feet in Breadth.”

Being one of that legendary breed of Swiss soldiers of fortune, Blommart had served as a warrant officer in the British Royal Navy during the Seven Years War. However, he left the Royal

*Mount Locust during the 1780's before it was changed by additions or alterations.*



Navy and conducted a group of Swiss Protestant immigrants into the new colony. They arrived in West Florida around 1765.

In Pensacola, the capital of British West Florida, Blommart became a man of consequence and a member of the colonial legislature. Moving to Natchez, he became a merchant, fur trader, land speculator, and planter. By 1781 he was one of the wealthiest men in the Old Natchez District. But he was playing his part

against a strange discordant background brought on by the American Revolution.

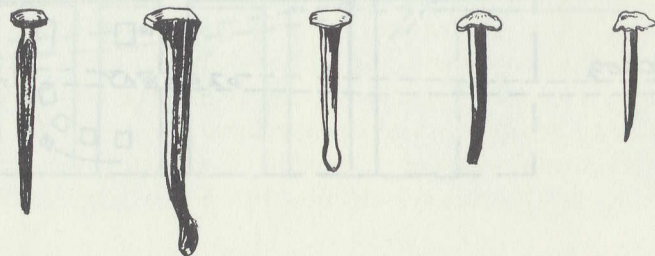
Natchez was in turmoil. Factions of British militiamen openly threatened each other. Many settlers wished merely to be left in peace. American partisans operating from the armed river vessel, *Rattletrap*, harrassed and plundered the pioneers. From New Orleans, Spain glowered at Britain and quietly slipped arms to the Virginia troops of George Rogers Clark operating in the West. Internal dissension, apathy, Spanish intrigue, and American raids were loosening Britain's grip on the Natchez country.

Taking advantage of this situation, Spain went to war with Britain in 1779, captured Baton Rouge, and peacefully occupied Natchez. Following the generous custom of the time, Spanish authorities merely demanded of the British settlers an oath of fidelity. As with other pioneers, Blommart's affairs seemed not to suffer under Spanish rule.

By 1781 Pensacola's British commandant was planning to regain the lost territory. He commissioned Blommart a temporary captain and urged him to lead a revolt in Natchez while British regulars moved on Mobile and Baton Rouge.

The aging officer raised a force and captured the Natchez fortification only to learn that Spanish troops had captured Pensacola. Most of the unfortunate rebels fled upon learning that they could expect no help. A few made their way, via the Trace, to Nashville, a feat which dramatized the old Indian trail, and perhaps offered a

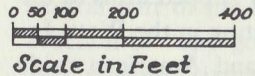
*Typical nails and spikes from the old house.*



# Mount Locust and Union Town

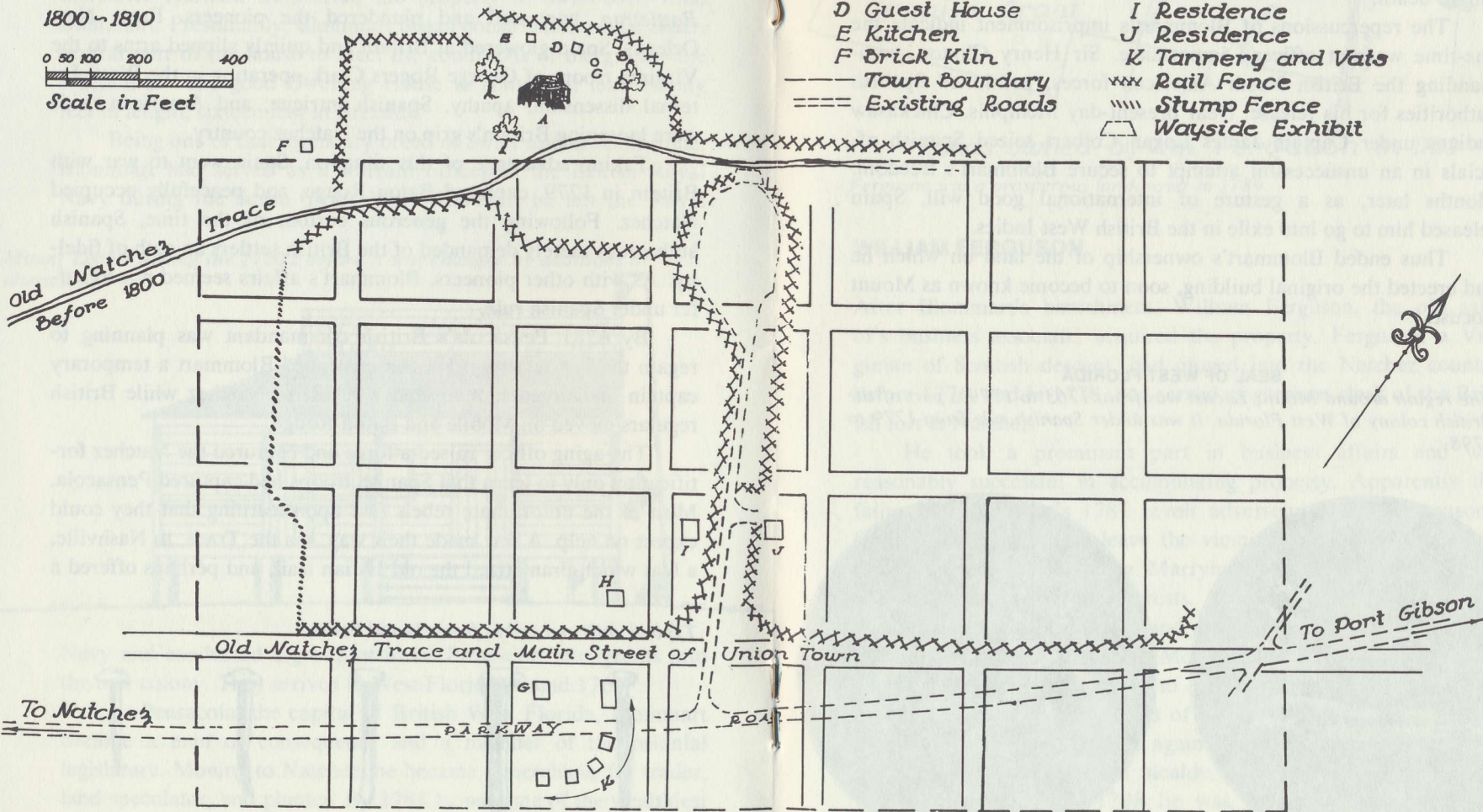
Vicinity Map

1800 ~ 1810



## Key to Map

- |                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| A Mount Locust     | Union Town             |
| B Overseer's House | G Store and Inn (1807) |
| C Nursery          | H Doctor's House       |
| D Guest House      | I Residence            |
| E Kitchen          | J Residence            |
| F Brick Kiln       | K Tannery and Vats     |
| --- Town Boundary  | xxx Rail Fence         |
| --- Existing Roads | Stump Fence            |
|                    | □ Wayside Exhibit      |



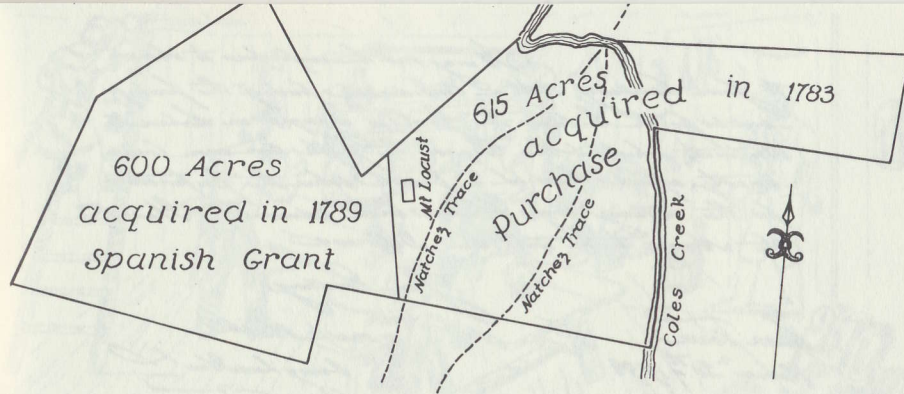
faint suggestion of how important it would be ten years later. Blommart remained to surrender the fort and its stores. Upon his surrender, the Spanish, remembering his oath of fidelity, jailed, tried, and convicted him, confiscated his property and sentenced him to death.

The repercussions of Blommart's imprisonment indicate the one-time warrant officer's importance. Sir Henry Clinton, commanding the British North American forces, petitioned Spanish authorities for his release. Near present-day Memphis, Chickasaw Indians under Captain James Logan Colbert seized Spanish officials in an unsuccessful attempt to secure Blommart's freedom. Months later, as a gesture of international good will, Spain released him to go into exile in the British West Indies.

Thus ended Blommart's ownership of the land on which he had erected the original building, soon to become known as Mount Locust.

#### SEAL OF WEST FLORIDA

*The region around Mount Locust was from 1763 to 1779 a part of the British colony of West Florida. It was under Spanish rule from 1779 to 1798.*



*Lands owned by Wm. Ferguson in 1789*

*Ferguson was a prosperous landowner in 1789.*

#### WILLIAM FERGUSON

After Blommart's banishment, William Ferguson, the old sailor's business associate, acquired the property. Ferguson, a Virginian of Scottish descent, had moved into the Natchez country before 1776, and in 1778, had served as garrison clerk of the British fort at Natchez.

He took a prominent part in business affairs and was reasonably successful in accumulating property. Apparently the failure of Blommart's 1781 revolt adversely affected Ferguson's fortunes forcing him to leave the vicinity of Mount Locust and move to a farm near Natchez. Marrying Paulina Burch in 1783, he again began to expand his interests.

The Fergusons sold the land near Natchez in 1784, returned to Cole's Creek, and bought Mount Locust. Receiving a grant which increased his holdings to 1,215 acres, Ferguson devoted most of his time to the affairs of a planter and to his family of seven children. Public duties again claimed his abilities in 1797 when he served as Spanish alcalde, or magistrate, of the Coles Creek district, and in 1798 he was appointed first sheriff of Pickering County (now Jefferson), Mississippi.



It may not be improper to observe to your Excellency, that a considerable part of the funds provided for the building the jail, is engaged in advance to contractors, which at this season the people can never conveniently afford them at a period when the preparations for the coming crop, become more advanced. I have the pleasure to be with due Difference

Your Excellency's  
most Obedt  
servt  
Wm. Ferguson

Union Town  
Nov 20<sup>th</sup> 1798

Excerpt from letter to Governor Sargent. Ferguson hoped Union Town would become the county seat and told Governor Sargent how a jail could have been built.

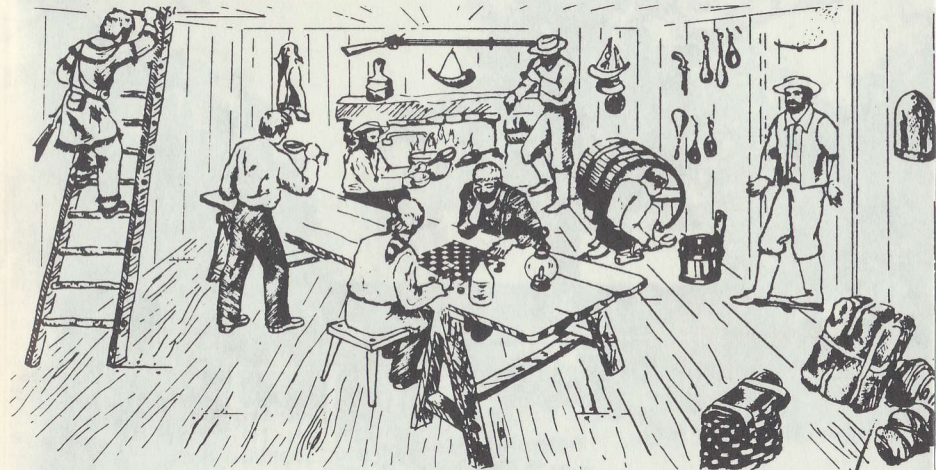
## THE TOWN OF UNION

While farming was Ferguson's major interest, he entered into several other ventures. Homeward bound Kaintucks searching for accommodations "forced" him to become an innkeeper. The founding of a town—a dream typical of many pioneers—also claimed Ferguson's attention. Hopefully, he and four of his neighbors became trustees of the new village of Union which was to occupy the land to the front of Mount Locust. The town was laid out, lots were sold, and perhaps a half dozen buildings were erected.

A physician soon located there. Ferguson himself, with a partner, opened a store. Many years later Col. John A. Watkins of New Orleans, who had lived near Union as a boy, commented on other business enterprises:

Farley made all the hats. We killed coons and took the skins to him, and in return got a hat. Jake Warner made shoes . . . Pintard was the cabinet maker, McMurchy made wagons, ploughs, etc. Greenleaf . . . established a cotton gin factory.

Unfortunately, the town was not chosen as the county seat and, therefore, lost much of its chance for survival. With Ferguson's death in 1801, it was doomed.



Travel on the Old Trace was not always boring or dangerous.

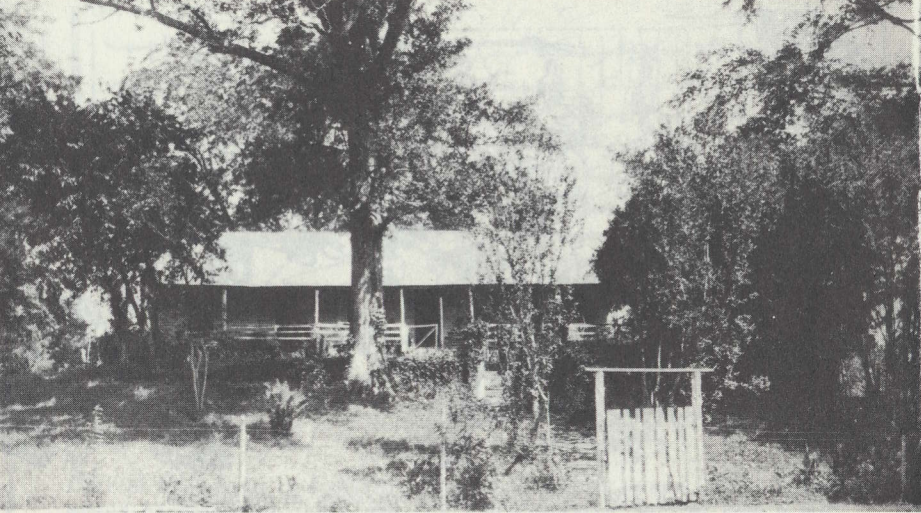
## MOUNT LOCUST AS AN INN

Ferguson's family of seven inherited a successful inn and a producing plantation. Five years later Paulina Ferguson married James Chamberlain and the family soon grew to ten. Inn and plantation continued to provide a comfortable livelihood for the growing family.

The central room, largest and oldest in the house, served as the tap room and as the family living room. Here guests were received and fed. Here also the family gathered, except when crowded out by travelers. Other rooms served as the family's private living quarters.

In the earliest days, a guest who wished shelter climbed to the loft from the rear gallery. Others, with saddles for pillows, slept on the floor in the tap room or in the yard.

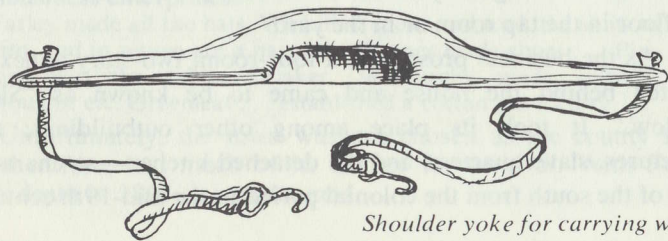
As the business prospered, a four-room, two-story annex was erected behind the house and came to be known as "Sleepy Hollow." It took its place among other outbuildings; farm structures, slave quarters, and the detached kitchen—so characteristic of the south from the colonial period to the mid-19th century.



Prior to 1937 Mount Locust was still the home of descendants of the Ferguson-Chamberlain family.

Fewer travelers appeared on the Natchez Trace after our second war with England. With steamboats running from New Orleans to Pittsburgh after 1820, the Trace ceased to be the main thoroughfare between Natchez, Nashville, and the East. As new roads were cleared, and especially after the county seat was moved from Greenville to Fayette in 1825, that part of the Old Trace near Mount Locust became merely another road from Natchez to Jackson, Mississippi.

After about 1825 the inn no longer catered to travelers but to well-to-do-Natcheans who sought, in the rural solitude of Mount Locust, rest from the strenuous bustle of city life. This state of affairs continued until shortly before Paulina's death in 1849.



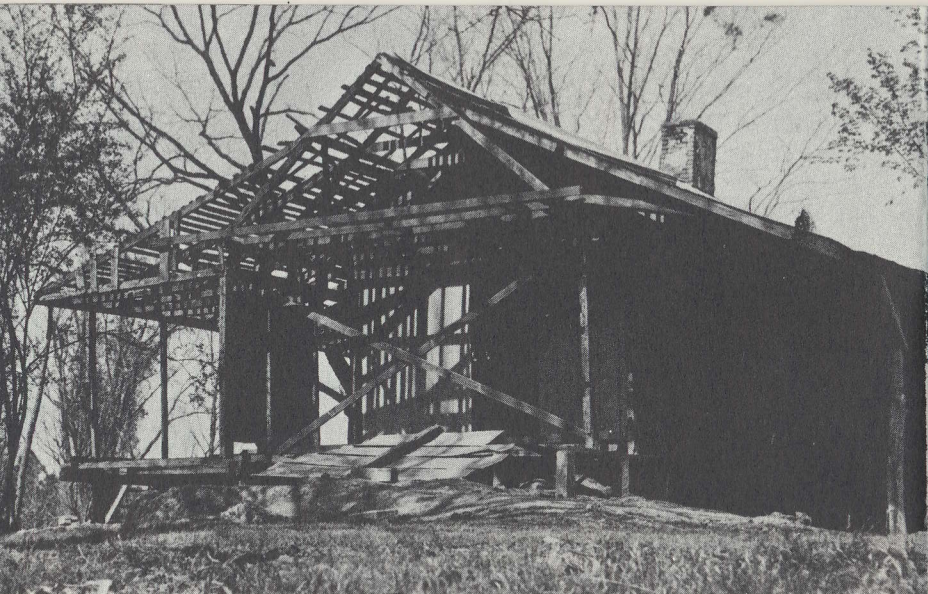
Shoulder yoke for carrying water.

## PAULINA BURCH

The life of Paulina Burch (Ferguson-Chamberlain) is a living demonstration of a homely truth. Without her, and other women like her, the American frontier could never have been conquered. She had no opportunity to achieve fame by fighting off Indians, as did many frontier women, but by patience, industry, toil, and common sense she, as did countless others, helped to raise her family from poverty to affluence.

At the end of the American Revolution Paulina came to Mount Locust as a bride. She bore and raised a large family, conducted a business, and managed a farm which grew into a plantation. Sixty-six years later and a dozen years before the Civil War she died. The plantation, largely the product of Paulina's industry and management, was appraised at upwards of \$50,000.

But this was not the whole story. She provided a better than average education for her children, one of whom studied at the well-known Transylvania College in Kentucky and became a lawyer and successful planter. Judging from the library, which she assembled during the 1820's and 30's, and which was unusual for the American frontier, Paulina was a woman of intelligence and good taste. She made a lasting impression on her family, and after the lapse of more than a century, her numerous descendants speak of her with respect and affection, as "Grandma Polly."



*Part of the original framing was uncovered while restoration was in progress in 1956.*

## **MOUNT LOCUST TODAY**

During the restoration of Mount Locust a National Park Service architect commented:

In spite of an amazing number of alterations and the deterioration and disappearance of many important parts, it is possible to trace the evolution of the building . . . The remaining portions of the frame, the pattern of the old sheathing boards, paint and the type of nails . . . have all been considered . . . and each has information to contribute.

Mount Locust shows British and French influence. The framework indicated that the original house consisted of a large room, 16 by 20 feet, and three galleries; the south portions were enclosed to form small rooms. The main room conformed to the British West Florida land grant regulations.

French influence is seen in the galleries, front and rear, and

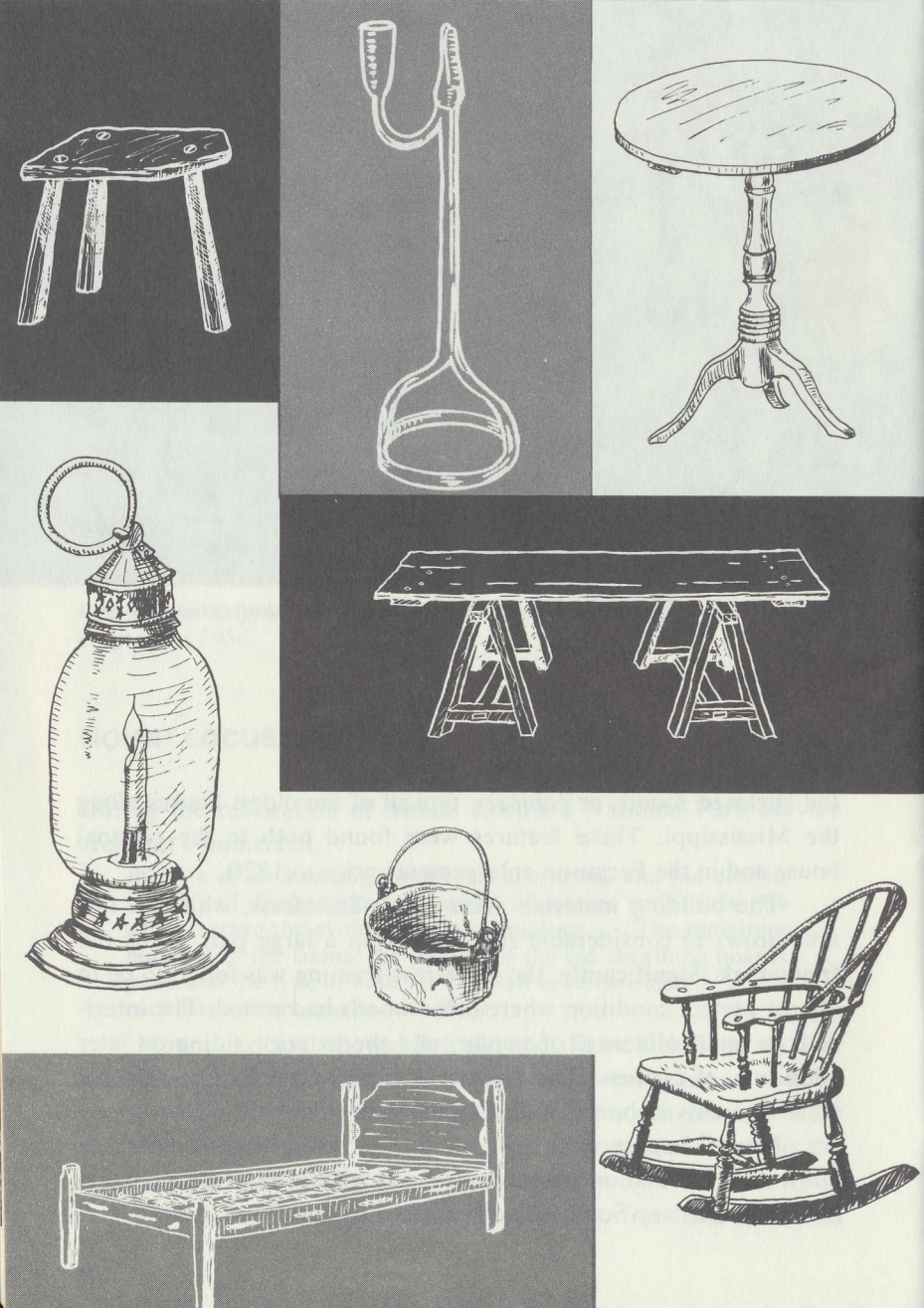


*Brick, fired at the nearby kiln, were used in walks, chimneys, and steps.*

the enclosed rooms, or *cabinets*, typical of the oldest houses along the Mississippi. These features were found both in the original house and in the Ferguson enlargements prior to 1820.

The building materials were local. Sassafras, which in this area grows to considerable size, makes up a large part of the old framework. Significantly, the sassafras framing was found to be in almost perfect condition where other woods had rotted. The interior trim and walls were of poplar, and the exterior siding on later additions, of cypress. The brick was fired in a kiln, the ruins of which are only a short distance south of the house.

Mount Locust was built on unenclosed piling in order to allow free circulation of air underneath. This was true of many houses in the deep South as well as in the British West Indies.



## NOTE ON FURNISHINGS

The Mount Locust you see today was refurnished with period furniture and household objects such as might have been seen by those who traveled the Trace and lodged at the inn during the 1820's. Of necessity, the various pieces of furniture include some reproductions after regional examples. The underlying aim has been not to assemble a collection of antiques, but rather to recreate the appearance and atmosphere of the interior of a frontier inn and homestead.

The restoration represents a house which had been occupied by the same family for more than 40 years. Some of the primitive products of the raw frontier must have been retained along with cherished heirlooms from faraway Virginia. Later acquisitions doubtless were the products of the skilled artisans who had been drawn to Natchez by the increasing wealth of the region.

The trestle table in the tap room is a reproduction of an example of local origin. Such tables were used in early inns because when trestle and top were stood against a wall there was more space for guests to sleep on the floor. The Windsor rocker in the room to the left of the tap room is an antique, such as might have been acquired as the family prospered. The chest of drawers in the back bedroom is of the period and intended to be representative of those heirlooms brought by pioneer families from their old homes in the "East."

