

The Cockrill-Mayhew Cottage and Beersheba Porcelain



John Armfield sold to Sterling Robertson Cockrill of Nashville a parcel of land for \$5.00 containing 1.16 acres beginning near the carpenter's shop, James H. Wilson's lot, and M. A. Price's livery stable. The deed said Cockrill agreed to improve the lot within a year by erection of a house and kitchen suitable for a private residence, and not to sell it without Armfield's consent during his lifetime. The deed was signed in September 1858 and witnessed by S. W. Carmack, John Waters, and John M. Bass. The fact that the house was definitely built after Armfield's sawmill at Laurel was in operation but is nevertheless constructed of hand-hewn logs shows that such logs are not a proof that the house was built before 1855 when the sawmill started operation.

The Cockrill family had been prominent in Nashville for many years. The paternal grandmother of Sterling R. Cockrill was Ann Robertson Johnson

Cockrill (1757 - 1821), sister of James Robertson, founder of Nashville. In July 1776, when the men were away, Fort Caswell was attacked by Indians trying to set the stockade afire. It was wash day; and 19-year-old Ann organized the women to pass buckets of boiling water up to her which she dumped over the stockade onto the attackers. Although wounded, she persisted and saved the fort. After the accidental death of her first husband, she and her three small daughters joined the expedition of John Donelson to bring families to the men who had established the settlement at Nashville. They took a flatboat down the Tennessee; when they started up the Ohio and Cumberland, all the men were needed for poling, so Ann took the tiller and guided the boat in the eddies near the banks up to Nashville. There she met and married John Cockrill II, and they lived on a 640-acre tract granted them by the state of North Carolina. This tract contained a very

fine spring known as "Cockrill Spring." Today Centennial Park is located on this land. Ann became the first school teacher in Middle Tennessee, teaching 50 children at a time.

The fifth child of John and Ann was Mark Robertson Cockrill whose sheep won first prize for fine wool at the World's Fair in 1851 in London, England. In 1854 the Tennessee legislature gave him a gold medal for raising the finest wool in the world. In 1850 there were only two millionaires in Tennessee and one of them was Mark Cockrill. The third child of John and Ann was Sterling Robertson Cockrill, but when he died before marrying his older brother, John, named his firstborn son for his brother. It was this Sterling Robertson Cockrill II (Nashville 1804 - Mt. Nebo, Arkansas 1891) who bought the land from Armfield and built the house in Beersheba. Cockrill must have been temporarily impoverished by the Civil War, for with the Beersheba property attached for \$1,500, the Grundy County sheriff sold it at the September 1865 term of Court. The highest bidder was Sam Henderson, who bought it for \$400. (Armfield, in a letter to Ben Cagle quoted early in this book, tells Cagle to go to Sam Henderson to cash a check.) Henderson must have quickly sold the house for when it next appears in the land records, along with two acres of land and the two adjacent cottages, as sold to Ernest J. Hege in 1874, the seller was not Henderson but J.M. Spurlock, J. F. Morford, and C. Coffee. They must have put properties together to make the sale to Hege. (Coffee owned what was later called the Nelson-Hopper cottage in the southwest corner of the hotel compound.) Hege never lived in the houses. He and probably the previous owners rented them out, especially during the summers.

One of those renters may have been none other than Sterling R. Cockrill. II On August 3, 1873, the *Nashville American* carried an article beginning as follows:

We print this morning a suggestive communication from Col. Sterling R. Cockrill, formerly of this city, now Vice-President of the Cotton Planters' Association, a cotton planter of 40 years' experience and now planting in [Jefferson County] Arkansas. At present, as is his usual custom, he is spending the Summer at Beersheba Springs in the Cumberland Mountains.

The communication, presumably written at Beersheba, proposed creation by Congress of a cotton bank

to finance the building of cotton spinning and weaving plants in the South. The story was reprinted on August 7 by the *New York Times*. The Colonel seems to have made a financial comeback. In 1883, he is mentioned as a major contributor to making possible the Arkansas display at the Industrial Exhibition held in Louisville. His 8th child was Sterling R. Cockrill III. Born in 1847, he became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Arkansas in 1884 - 1893. As a boy, he must have played at Beersheba, but the Cockrills never bought another place here. (Sterling III had a son named Ashley, who had a son named Sterling, who had a son named Sterling. This Sterling Robertson Cockrill -- the 7th; there were two on collateral lines -- was Speaker of the House in the Arkansas legislature in 1967 and the running mate of Winthrop Rockefeller for governor in 1971. He graciously contributed to this account of the Cockrills, but was previously unaware of the Beersheba connection.)

From 1918 to 1925 all three of the Hege houses and land were leased by Hege to Henry L. Brown. In 1925 the Northcuts took possession of the property and in 1926 sold it to George McGee and his wife, Lela Gross McGee. Sometime after 1925 three or four rooms in the shape of an L on the back and also the detached kitchen and dining room were torn down. The McGees had two children, Wilda, who married Lyndon Hillis, and G. W., who married Nelma Dean Wannamaker. After the death of Mrs. McGee, the house was sold at public auction in December 1981 to settle the estate. The buyer was Lyndon Hillis, son-in-law of the McGees.

The house was then bought in 1985 by Phil and Terri Mayhew, who moved to Beersheba from Georgia in January, 1986. Phil's father, T.W. Mayhew, a Methodist minister, had participated in the purchase of the hotel by the church in 1941 and had built the house now called the Mayhew-Cate cottage. Methodist ministers moved regularly and generally lived in parsonages supplied by the church, so for Phil the house at Beersheba was the one place he could call home. For him and for Terri, the move to Beersheba was indeed a true coming home, a return to roots.

At the same time, however, they brought new skills, learned elsewhere, with which they created Beersheba Porcelain. This firm, located in the cottage, produces ceramics in the tradition of the fine porcelains going back to 200 B.C. in China and to 1708 in Dresden, where extensive experiments had led to the discovery of the formula. Porcelain is made from a

very pure form of clay composed of (1) silica (or flint or quartz) (2) kaolin (a mixture of silica and alumina that adds pliability to the mixture and allows it to be molded by hand), and (3) feldspar (the fluxing or melting agent which causes the mixture to fuse at the right temperatures). The Mayhews use silica and feldspar from the southeastern United States and kaolin from England. In essence, porcelain is a cross between clay and glass with the pliability and formability of clay at normal temperatures but, after firing, the strength, translucence and durability of glass. In the firing, the pieces become completely vitrified. The main difference between porcelain and stoneware is that the porcelain clay is free of the impurities which give the stoneware clays their various colors and textures but also interfere with the formation of tightly interlocking crystals which form as the material cools after being heated to its fusing temperature. It is this uniform crystalline structure, like that of glass, which gives thin porcelain its translucence. The end result is a product that is far harder, more resistant to abrasion and chipping, and thus more long-lasting than a similar product made from stoneware clay.

Each piece of Beersheba "Quartzware" porcelain is completely hand made from the Mayhews' own designs and porcelain recipes, is fired in the kiln they built on the premises to cone 16 (2718° F.) and is completely dishwasher proof, oven proof, and absolutely lead-free. Phil makes the large pieces, many turned on the traditional potter's wheel. Terri does the jewelry, and their son Brad has specialized in fern imprint pieces with genuine Beersheba ferns making the pattern. They have also trained in the work LeTeasa King and her daughter Tiffany, Lisa Earls (who now runs the

Beersheba Post Office), and her niece Brittany McDaniel. Silver work for the jewelry is done by Phil's daughter Leah and her husband John Sullens, presently of Cleveland, Georgia but with plans to move to Beersheba..

Phil likes to say, "Our primary export is harmony, captured and frozen forever in colorful porcelain of our own design and creation to bring visual music to your life. Only the most pure, positive and powerful of vibrations, thaumaturgical procedures and original harmonic compositions are used in the manufacturing process. Beersheba Porcelain is truly a most judicious and aesthetic blend of Earth, Water, Air and Fire."

Phil may be a bit given to exaggeration of the magical powers of the porcelain, but it is no exaggeration to say that the Mayhew home has been the scene of a modern miracle. In the summer of 2000, Terri was struck by a ruptured aneurysm behind one eye, inoperable by the then standard methods. A few years earlier, it would have meant certain death. A new technique, endovascular coiling, then being developed at St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville, brought her through the crisis, but it took years of loving care by Phil and the associates to nurse her back to health, to the great joy of everyone connected with Beersheba.

Whether magical or merely beautiful, Beersheba Porcelain is readily found on the Internet or can be reached by telephone at 931-692-2280 or by mail at P.O. Box 88, Beersheba Springs, TN 37305. Visitors are welcome, but it is a good idea to call ahead.

Margaret Coppinger, Clopper Almon,
and Phil Mayhew

