

For the majority of her young life, Adelia Hayes Franklin enjoyed the pleasures of estate living. Oliver B. Hayes, Adelia's father, purchased his own estate, known as Rokeby, south of Nashville in 1827 (demolished 1949), while Adelia was still a child. Outside her windows at Rokeby sweeping lawns led to flower gardens featuring a vine covered gateway.¹ Isaac Franklin's two thousand acre Fairvue estate boasted extensive landscaped grounds and greenhouses for Adelia Franklin's enjoyment. Sights, sounds and smells of one of the fastest growing cities in the south, were a far different atmosphere for the young widow.

When Franklin inherited a fortune over which she had complete control, plans were quickly formulated for the creation of yet another estate. Think of Rokeby and Fairvue as her primary inspiration, certainly not architecturally, for the new Belmont was in an entirely different style, but unquestionably one for the lifestyle a country estate afforded. In retrospect the progression in Franklin's life from one estate to another, leading to Belmont's development as the antebellum south's premiere country estate, can easily be documented.



Nashville in the 1840s expanded hastily in multiple directions. This seems to have been especially true to the south, as residential development led to the cre-

ation of new political wards.² Some of the most attractive land lay to the south as evidenced by the creation of the Oliver B. Hayes estate, Rokeby. Just to the south of Rokeby on adjacent land, Adelia Franklin's uncle, Leven Browning, constructed a small neo-classical country house. This structure was unique in form to Tennessee, as surviving evidence has shown. Within a decade Browning's brick house succumbed to fire, leaving a hilltop scarred with what we presume to have been a smoke stained empty shell.

How convenient for the widow Franklin, a rich young woman with the wherewithal to build where, when, and how she chose, that a building site was available on one of the highest hills in Nashville. Since ancient times, for both defense and visibility, people of means have sought hilltops on which to construct forts, castles, then country houses when civilization progressed to a more peaceful society. Most importantly, in Nashville summers, breezes flowed up and over hills and valleys, then into and out of houses with proper alignment to those breezes.

Hilltop sites were highly sought by Nashvillians able to afford houses similar to Leven Browning's. Franklin left behind no diaries or journals relaying her thoughts as she accumulated land for her Belmont estate. What is known, in the spring of 1849, the soon to be Mrs. Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen purchased the site of her uncle's burned out house. Other contiguous tracts of land

were combined in an attempt to expand the boundaries of her hilltop estate, eventually reaching 177 acres.

One of the primary occupants of the new Belmont would be Adelia's second husband Joseph, a native of Huntsville, Alabama, where he had recently served as the federal prosecutor for northern Alabama. Only one year older than his bride, Joseph was Adelia's contemporary, while Isaac Franklin had been twenty-eight years Adelia's senior.

Once the Acklens secured land for Belmont, the question of what type of house to build naturally came into question. Masonry walls presented a solidity and permanence far outweighing any wooden structure. The factor of surviving walls from the Browning residence played into this decision. Should the site be cleared entirely, or would building within the shell of the previous dwelling possibly be an option? The Acklens and modern researchers have both been perplexed by this question when delving into the architectural evolution of Belmont Mansion. Early recorders of Belmont assumed, erroneously it has turned out, that the Acklens were the first to build upon the hill, or if not the first that the site was cleared prior to commencement of construction.

To adequately interpret the design and metamorphosis of Belmont, one must first comprehend the Acklens' choice to build within the shell of the house built by her uncle. Today we would likely hastily clear the ruins, moving on, not with

repair, but new construction. Exhaustive research has failed to reveal the date of the fire that destroyed Browning's villa.

Having made the decision to repair, rebuild, and enlarge, the primary concern for the Acklens would have been the stability of the Browning house's remaining walls. This factor depended upon the length of time those walls were exposed to weather. Contingent on how long the building stood open, freeze/thaw patterns could have had disastrous implications for blending old walls into new construction.

Brick making in this period had advanced little from ancient times. Clay, the natural product utilized in the process, was still packed into wooden brick molds, sun-dried, then fired in a kiln. Primitive kilns constructed, primarily of the bricks themselves, were fueled by a wood fire laid in the center for firing or curing the brick. As stacked, bricks closest to the fire were exposed to the greatest amount of heat, assuring the hardest brick for use in an exterior wall. In exterior loadbearing brick construction, "hard fired" bricks were laid in different structural bonds, such as Common, English, or Flemish. "Soft fired" bricks furthest from the fire, were meant for interior load bearing walls. Exposed to weather "soft fired" bricks quickly deteriorate, turning to powder.

Various phases of restoration at Belmont Mansion have led to major plaster repairs in several rooms. Exposed evidence proves conclusively that smoke