

to the flames of time. Suffice it to say certain portions of the Browning house survived as detailed by existing evidence in restored areas, as well as the basement below. It was within that space, previously home to Leven Browning and his wife Lucinda Hightower, that Belmont was planned and built by the Acklens.



By the spring of 1850, Joseph and Adelia Acklen were preparing to celebrate their first anniversary, the birth of their first child, Joseph Hayes Acklen, (born May 20, 1850) plus planning their new home. The 1850 United States Census lists a number of workers already living on the property, including ten African-Americans.⁴ We can be sure that by the summer of 1850 materials were assembled and construction was underway.

Multiple nationalities and races are well represented by talented workers in any era. Skilled workers were just as likely to be African American as recent immigrants. The antebellum south made use of enslaved peoples in broader tasks than field workers or house servants. It is unrealistic to believe Belmont could or would have been constructed without the labor of enslaved workmen. Certainly clearing of the site would have been accomplished by Acklen slaves, listed as having been on site in 1850. The first weeks required intense labor as damaged walls came

down and new foundations were dug for the expansion. As work proceeded, more highly skilled labor was required. Those skills were often found within a local labor force including enslaved people. Owners of enslaved laborers were known to lease out services of a black carpenter or mason to master builders, just as they would any other piece of property. Builders choosing enslaved workers had the option of ownership or leasing. Leasing workers was often viewed as a more efficient way of doing business.

George Steele, a builder in Huntsville, Alabama, Joseph Acklen's birthplace, owned eleven slaves; two carpenters, five bricklayers, one stonecutter, and three plasterers.⁵ Steele is an excellent example of a professional builder with a successful practice who utilized the labors of his own personal workforce. Steele's example was matched by builders and cabinetmakers throughout the south. *DeBow's Commercial Review*, a chronicle of all things southern in the antebellum period listed, four architects, 247 carpenters, twenty-seven brickmasons, seventeen stonemasons, eight stonecutters, seven lime-makers, thirty-two brickmakers, sixteen house plasterers, plus twenty-three painters and paperhangers all operating in Nashville in 1846.⁶

The axis of the ruined Browning house appears to have been south to north taking advantage of prevailing breezes. Belmont from the first was designed to take advantage of this gift from nature.

Predominating winds, originating in the southwest, speedily climbed Belmont's hill, ultimately pushing through, up, and around any residence built upon the hilltop.

Adelia Acklen's Nashville townhouse was certainly closely surrounded by similar houses and commercial establishments. Moving to town from the pastoral atmosphere of Fairvue, to the frenetic activity of downtown Nashville city could not have been a pleasant transition. Fairvue most certainly offered far healthier and pleasurable conditions for Acklen's family.

Popular belief in the nineteenth century perpetuated the conviction that many fatal diseases were air-born. Putrid inner city air was believed to be the cause of multiple deaths in times of cholera and yellow fever epidemics. City dwellers of means choose to remove themselves to the country during dangerous months when such diseases were rampant. Former president James K. Polk, just weeks after attending the Acklen wedding in May of 1849, fell victim to cholera. A few years before Adelia Franklin Acklen had lost two children to disease.

It is no wonder Acklen, now remarried, carrying yet another child, chose to spend a portion of her new wealth building a country house in an attempt to escape pestilence in the city two miles away. This was a fair distance in the 1850s. Such a trip would take an average person approximately an hour on foot,

and less than thirty minutes when traveling by carriage. Residing at Belmont the Acklens would be a safe distance from infectious diseases, yet close enough to participate in business and social activities on their newly acquired hilltop.

From ancient times to the end of the country house era in the early twentieth century, spectacular views became paramount when planning a new dwelling. The selection of an elevated site provided relaxing views of unchanged landscape near and far. Surviving photos taken from Belmont's roof in the 1890s reveal an unspoiled landscape of tree-covered hills to the south. To the north the Acklens overlooked a rapidly expanding Nashville still surrounded by a swath of green. Strickland's Tennessee State Capitol, one of the most important structures in the new nation, could be seen rising in the distance.

What better prospect could this young couple expect to find than the land in which Adelia Acklen was investing? Their view extended for miles in any direction, meaning Belmont would also be visible for that same distance. The site was perfect for innumerable reasons, least of which was the northern boundary of their assembled property touched the southern edge of Rokeby, Acklen's father's estate. To the east lay Hillside, the property of sister Corinne Hayes and her husband William Lawrence. Here in the southeast quadrant of Nashville an expansive family complex was taking root with