

Martha Fort was one of the largest land owners in Fayette County

Prior to Reconstruction, Fayette County's western boundary went to the Mississippi/Alabama line and encompassed what is now most of Lamar County. Records show that in the year 1824 Elias B. Fort purchased 926.9 acres of land in Fayette County which abutted Mississippi. In 1839, nine years after Elias B. Fort died, another 318.5 acres were purchased and added to the family estate under the name of his fourteen year old son, Elias Fort, II.

Elias Bolivar Fort married Martha Williams Battle in 1824 in Nash County, North Carolina. The Battles were a very wealthy and distinguished family in Halifax, Co., North Carolina. Martha, born in 1799, was the seventh of nine children. Her father, William Battle, had been a Captain in the Revolutionary War and her grandfather, also William, was a commissioned officer in the Revolutionary War. She was a great-grand daughter of Joseph and Martha (Drake) Williams, a direct descendent of Richard Drake and Sir Francis Drake.

Martha's younger brother Albert Battle had married Millicent Bealle of Georgia in 1822 and relocated to Tuscaloosa. He became the owner of extensive plantations in Tuscaloosa and Hale Counties and built a beautiful "town house" in Tuscaloosa now known as the Battle-Friedman House. Once the house was completed, Millicent turned her attention to the grounds. She employed an English landscape designer to design the gardens. The gardens at the Battle-Friedman House are thought to be the only ante-bellum gardens still existing in Alabama. The Battles enjoyed their elegant town house, which originally occupied an entire city block, for almost 40 years, but their Confederate investments ruined them. In 1875, Alfred Battle was forced to sell his town house to Bernard Friedman, a wealthy Hungarian immigrant and Tuscaloosa businessman. In 1965, Hugo Friedman donated the house to the city of Tuscaloosa.

Martha's youngest sister, Mary Ann, had come to Tuscaloosa to stay with her brother and his family and met and married Henry Watkins Collier, later to become Alabama's 14th Governor. Collier had been born in Virginia and moved to Huntsville, AL in 1818. Collier read law with Judge John Haywood of the Tennessee Supreme Court then returned to Huntsville to practice law. He later moved to Tuscaloosa and established a law practice with Simon Perry. He married Mary Ann Battle in 1826. In 1827 he ran successfully for the legislature. The legislature elected him judge of the Third Circuit Court. Once a Supreme Court was established by the Alabama legislature in 1836, Collier was elevated to that court and was named its chief justice. In 1849, shortly after the State Capitol was moved from Tuscaloosa to Montgomery, he ran successfully for Governor and served two terms. Many reforms in education, the penal system and the treatment of the mentally ill, such as the building of Bryce Hospital, can be attributed to him. Before he left office in 1853, he supervised the rebuilding of the capitol (the new capitol, completed in 1847, was destroyed by fire in Dec. of 1849). Due to poor health, he refused the legislature's offer of a seat in the U. S. Senate. He and Mary Ann later moved to Lauderdale County to be near the medicinal Bailey Springs. He died in 1855.

Within a few years of their marriage, Martha and Elias Fort left North Carolina in a carriage leading a caravan of household goods and slaves to Alabama. They had two small children and another on the way. They stopped for a while in Tuscaloosa to visit with her brother Albert and his family, but soon moved on to Fayette County where they established their large plantation. In 1830, within six years of establishing their plantation, Elias Fort died.

Martha continued to run and expand the plantation. 1830 census records show Martha Fort was the largest slave owner in the history of Fayette County with 61 slaves which also designated her as one of the largest slave owners in the state. The 1850 census records show she had 42 slaves. Her name does not appear among slave owners in Fayette County's 1860 census.

Martha, apparently tired of country life, built a beautiful “town house” in Columbus, Mississippi. The home is located at 510 Seventh Street North and now belongs to the Don DePriest family. DePriest bought the Fort House in the late 1980’s and has fully restored it to its original grandeur. The house is period perfect in colors, wallpaper, furniture and art.

Prior to the restoration, the house was thought to have been built in 1844. However, clues found during renovation in the house’s architectural structure and in courthouse records indicate the house was standing in 1833. Martha apparently began planning and building the house shortly after her husband’s death in 1830. The house contains 9,700 square feet and has 20 rooms.

Martha had 5 children with Elias Fort. Most of her children were young when she married Elisha Sharp in 1837. She had two children with Elisha Sharp. One could speculate that Elisha Sharp did not live up to Martha’s expectations or he could not compete with the memory of Elias Fort since Martha divorced Sharp in 1840. Martha took back her Fort name and gave the two Sharp children the Fort name also. Shortly after her divorce, the Martha Fort House became the scene of many parties and socials.

Her youngest son, William Battle Sharp Fort eventually married his half-first-cousin, Sally Bouldin Collier, daughter of Governor Henry Watkins and Mary Ann Collier.

Martha’s oldest daughter Mary Ann Fort married William Mayo who was killed fighting for the Confederacy in the Civil War. Mary stayed on the plantation and never relocated to Columbus. Records show that in 1857 Mary Fort applied to the county and the state legislature to erect a gate across the Fayetteville-Columbus Road. Her request was granted provided the gate lock was high enough to be unlocked from horseback or carriage so travelers would not have to dismount.

Martha Fort outlived three of her seven children and died in 1876 at the age of 77 years. Her son, Elias never married. He died in 1895 and is buried beside his mother at the Friendship Cemetery in Columbus, Mississippi. The Martha Fort House was sold in 1877.

Information for this article was taken from The Alabama Department of Archives and History, the publication Historic Tuscaloosa”, the Columbus, MS Tourism Assoc. and the Fayette County Historical Society publication “150 Yesteryears”.

Photo: **Martha Fort House c. 1833**
510 Seventh Street North
Columbus, MS