

# Martin Cheairs House or Ferguson Hall Historical Notes

SHHC Recognition Document: <https://www.springhilltn.org/DocumentCenter/View/8/Resolution-08-43?bidId=>

SHHC Video Series Link: <https://www.springhilltn.org/CivicMedia?VID=Ferguson-Hall-Historic-Video-Series-25>

## \*Statement of Significance\*

The first house built on this property was called "Ann's Bower." It was built by a Revolutionary War soldier who was awarded the land grant prior to 1819. The property was sold to the Peters family who built another house there. The last of these early log houses was torn down in 1878. The Peters family owned the property until the late 1830s. They sold a part of it to Dr. John Haddox, a local physician. Dr. Haddox built a house on the land, prior to his death in 1854.

Martin Cheairs acquired the property from Doctor Haddox at about the same time his brother, Major Nathan Francis Cheairs, was building "Rippa Villa" manor, a magnificent estate, located a short distance down Columbia Pike. Both of these houses were located on the same side of the pike and they were surrounded by acres of park-like woodlands. It is believed that Nathan Vaught, the master builder of Columbia, worked on both of these houses during the years prior to the U.S. Civil War, and that the brick was made by William McKissack's slaves.

The two estates are similar in style, plan and proportion. The Martin Cheairs house may have served as a model for "Rippa Villa." Both houses are constructed of brick and the portico entrances are identical. The fluted column shafts, cast iron capitals, dentilated cornice and entablatures are alike. The Cheairs family came to Spring Hill prior to 1810. They owned a vast amount of land. These two estates represented large antebellum plantations in Spring Hill.

Martin Cheairs died in 1891 and the Cheairs family sold the property to the Spring Hill Male College in 1905. The college became the Branham-Hughes Academy and at that time brick additions were added to the back wing of the house. Several other structures were added to the 57 acres to accommodate the 300 boarding students who came to the academy from all over the United States. The house was called Ferguson Hall during this period. In 1934 the Church of Christ Tennessee Orphan Home purchased the old Branham-Hughes School property and in 1935 the home was moved from Columbia to Spring Hill. The board of directors built five dormitories, a new dining hall and kitchen, a small infirmary, superintendent's house, and a home for the resident manager.

The Martin Cheairs House is best known for its historical association to the Civil War era. In 1863 General Earle Van Dorn was murdered in the front room of the Martin Cheairs House. At that time, he was the commander of the Confederate Cavalry in Middle Tennessee. General Van Dorn commandeered the Cheairs House as his headquarters, and he was in residence there on the morning he was confronted by Dr. George B. Peters. Dr. Peters was a resident of Spring Hill. He shot Van Dorn during an argument.

The subject of the argument was the clandestine romance that had developed between General Van Dorn and Jessie Peters, Dr. Peter's wife.

The Martin Cheairs house is a landmark in Spring Hill. The style and design of the house is an excellent example of the Greek Revival style architecture built in Middle Tennessee prior to the Civil War. There is a strong architectural continuity between the Martin Cheairs House and the Nathaniel Cheairs House, Rippavilla. Both of these houses have been restored to their former appearance, and they have been maintained by their present owners as examples of the antebellum style architecture.

#### \*Architecture and Construction\*

When the Greek Revival style was introduced in Middle Tennessee, it had a dramatic effect on the design and proportions of the Martin Cheairs House in Spring Hill. The manor house was given prominence and distinction by its conspicuous location on the top of a hill, fronted by large park-like grounds, which were formerly planted with tall shade trees. The house features the three-by-five bay center hall plan. The stately appearance of the two-story, brick manor is reinforced by the white, columned, portico entrances located on the front, facing the highway, and on the side, facing the town.

The house was designed to be viewed from the park and to provide an interesting view of the countryside for its inhabitants. The rectangular shape features a low, hip-style roof and limestone mortar foundation walls, which raise the first story above the ground level at the front, providing a taller elevation for the stone steps to the porch entrance. There is a half basement under part of the first story and from this an underground tunnel runs 50 to 60 feet out to the back yard. The irregular shape plan features a one-bay, two-story wing, extending back from the north front. This wing provides the symmetrical basis required for the placement of the side hall portico porch.

The Greek Revival influence is well represented in the interior design, wood carpentry, architectural detail and monumental scale of the rooms. The ceilings are 12 to 14 feet tall. It is evident that some of the structural building was accomplished by slave laborers; however, the wood detail was constructed by skilled and adept craftsmen who had been hired by the owner. The design of the two panel doors appeared in 1830 in Minard Lefever's publication on Greek Revival style. A main feature is the wide and spacious center hall. The exquisite suspended circular staircase is constructed of wild cherry wood. The carefully fitted construction features no structural supports between floors, and the graceful design features a curled newel rail and round, tapered balusters. The staircase is located at the corner of the two converging hallways. The brick-bearing wall at the back of the hall behind the stair is built out to conform to the curvature of the staircase. Double parlors are located to the right side of the entrance. These adjoining rooms are typical of the Greek Revival style, and they are divided in the center by a 9- x 10-foot-wide, open archway. The fireplaces are located on the south wall and there are no windows on this wall. The front room is the present dining room and the adjoining room is reportedly the same room where General Van Dorn was murdered. This room is the present kitchen. There is a large parlor room to the left side of the entrance. This room is between the main hall and the north entrance side hall. The bay beyond this hall is being used as a bedroom. The north hall has been closed off at both ends and is used as a separate room.

There are an equal number of rooms on the second story. The main feature of the second floor is the wide center hall with the open well staircase and the double leaf doors to the front balcony. The north portico balcony is located at the end of the north hall. The baseboards are 18 inches tall; the solid wood doors are composed of two, narrow, vertical panels, pegged and joined in the traditional manner. The door moldings and enframements are designed in the "dog-ear" style. These doorways feature paneled wood casings set in the double, brick-bearing partition walls, and the enframement and casing designs are consistently the same design throughout the structure.

The wide, chimney breasts are built out into the first-story rooms. There are fireplaces in each of the second-floor rooms. The brick chimneystacks were rebuilt after they were toppled by a windstorm. The large, carved, wood mantles are designed in a style that illustrates the ingenuity and skill of the woodworker who designed a similar motif for the north porch column capitals. This handsome carved design features the stylized pineapple motif. The wood shafts are squared and paneled, and they rise to the height of the eaves. The main entrance portico features fluted, round-column shafts constructed of wood and designed with applied cast iron capitals in the Corinthian design. The deep entablatures, pediment ends, and ventilated cornice are identical for both porticos. This feature forms a continuous band extending entirely around the building. The main entrance doorways are recessed, and they feature tall, rectangular-shape, double-leaf doors with rectangular-shape transom and side-light panels divided by wide post and lintel style, heavy wood mullions.

The recessed second-story balcony features a Chippendale-style wood balustrade across the front. The school authorities have required that the original balcony on the north front be replaced by an iron fire escape. When the orphans' home restored the house, the academy additions were removed, and the house was returned to its original form. The only major change is in the rear wall elevations of the wing where original window apertures have been bricked over. The outlines for these are apparent, primarily because the old slave-made brick was somewhat smaller in scale than the new material. There have been many explanations for the windowless south elevation. The builder may have designed this feature to eliminate the south exposure; however, the solid wall has the effect of emphasizing the height and importance of the elevation and reinforcing the temple-style design. The shallow depth of the porticos serves to reinforce the same theme. The height of the columns, width of the cornices and angularity of the pediment create the illusion of the post and lintel idea, which is the basis for this style. The brick walls feature Flemish bond at the front facade and common bond, Houblebrick, bearing wall system throughout.

The brick was sandblasted in 1973 where the academy wing was removed at the east elevation. The yard behind the manor was changed when the orphans' home bought the property. Additional buildings were constructed around the circular drive at the back. These buildings, built of brick and frame, are the dormitories, dining room facilities, and a large administration building. They are located far enough from the manor house that they do not detract from the historic value of the site. The manor house is used as a dormitory for senior girls and many weddings have been held there for former residents. The house has been restored, and it is furnished and maintained in keeping with the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century period.