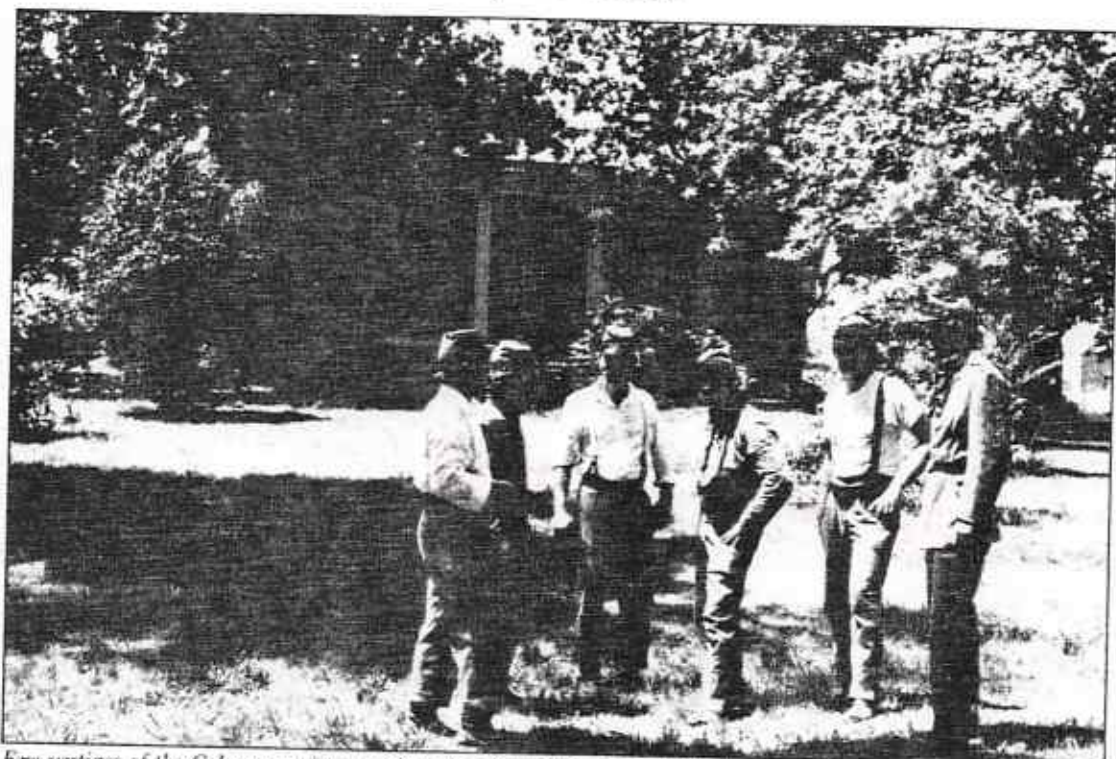


HERITAGE

A House of History

The Coker house in Edwards survived one of the Civil War's most decisive battles, but the ravages of time have taken their toll.

by Dale Pedrick



Few vestiges of the Cokers remain; records make references to items which disappeared "in consequence of war."

ON THE OUTSKIRTS of Raymond stands a decaying monument to Mississippi history. The Coker house, nestled in ancient shrubs off Mississippi Highway 467, has a story to tell about a meeting of Grant and Pemberton that some historians rank as one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War.

In 1863, Grant had burned Jackson and was preparing to finish off Vicksburg. As he headed for Confederate General Pemberton's chosen line of battle, drawn across three farms near Raymond, he met his most serious Confederate challenge near Champion's Hill.

Late in the afternoon of May 16th, a blisteringly hot spring day, Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman sprang from his horse to set up the line of defense in a desperate attempt to stop the powerful Federal assault. He was killed almost immediately and in the resulting confusion Confederate guns were turned

on the advancing Federal troops. The Coker house stood directly in the line of fire.

But the battle is only part of the story. The Coker family itself, headed by H. B. with his wife, Sarah Elizabeth, and their six children, were an interesting group.

In January of 1852 according to court records, H.B. Coker married Mrs. John Cotton, a widow with four small children. He vowed to build a house for their growing family, which soon included two more children. The house is now on the Edwards-Raymond road, presently Mississippi Highway 467.

The Greek Revival structure is a large, one-story, hipped-roof, frame building resting on huge brick foundations placed by the original builder. In recent years, concrete blocks were added to better support the weight of the huge rooms with their sixteen-foot ceilings.

Two chimneys supplied heat for the

four main rooms, while the wide central hall must have served as the traditional sitting and guest area common in houses of this style. The house has identical front and rear entrances, where some of the original glass still graces the windows.

Mrs. Coker died in 1862. Coker soon remarried, possibly a sister of the first Mrs. Coker. Fannie Fariss Coker lived only a year after her marriage, and family stories say Coker then married another Fariss sister who survived his death in 1878.

Eventually, the last of the Coker children married and moved to Alabama, leaving the old house in the hands of various tenant families. In 1932, the Alfred Gervin family bought the Coker place. A planter from New Orleans who had been farming in the Delta, Gervin suffered great losses during the Depression and moved to Hinds County to begin again. He purchased the house and land from the remaining Coker

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heir, Mrs. S. E. Thomas of Bessemer, Alabama.

Gervin brought another large, busy family to the Coker house and set about restoring the Greek Revival cottage to its former glory. The family found a desolate shell of a house when they moved in, but soon the beautiful mantels were cleaned and painted and bathrooms, electricity, and a sprinkler system added.

Louise Windham, a daughter of Alfred Gervin who now lives across the road from the Coker house, delights in telling of wrapping up warmly to go outside from the back porch to the dining room, which remained in the separate kitchen building. In 1933, even into the 1960s, the dining room remained just as the Cokers had left it, dirt floors and all.

Only one Coker item remained in the house, an ancient baby carriage that Mrs. Windham treasures and in which she strolled her own children. Battlefield shells and minie balls, uncovered in the Coker house yard by the young Gervins, rest like a small museum in her home.

When Mrs. Alfred Gervin died, the property had to be divided and sold by the remaining Gervin heirs. The new owners used the home for storage of egg cartons and other supplies. The house has gradually sagged, the result of a collision with a delivery truck, overgrowth of Mississippi's lush vines, and vandalism.

Now there is suddenly hope again for the history-laden house. Thanks to the generosity of Fred Adams of Cal-Maine Farms, the Coker house and its surrounding land have been deeded to the Jackson Civil War Round Table. The U. S. Parks Department has surveyed and made the house a National Historic Landmark because of the part it played in the Champion Hill battle.

The Department's survey proposes a six-stage program to restore the Coker house and make it a museum and visitors' center for the Champion Hill Battlefield. The State Department of Archives and History has assisted in the effort to find the means to restore the house, and private citizens are helping. According to estimates, it will cost around \$300,000 to restore the Coker house, and although many contributions have come in for the restoration from Civil War Round Tables all over the country, they are far from enough to begin the work. ●

Contributions for the Coker house restoration may be sent to The Jackson Civil War Round Table, Inc., Apt. 816, Magnolia Towers, 809 N. State Street, Jackson, MS 39201. ●