

**History of Clanton's Hotel on the Hill – Elliot / Palmer / Wilson /
Thomason / Willingham / Dewitt / Clanton
By Derric Scott**

From newspaper research and other sources.

COPYRIGHT © 2022
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
Rev 3.3, October 28, 2022

History of Clanton's Hotel on the Hill - Elliot / Palmer / Wilson / Thomason / Willingham Dewitt / Clanton

By Derric Scott

One of the most asked about buildings in Clanton is the old Willingham Hotel. At least, Willingham is the name most people today remember it by. The hotel and its predecessor have held many names over the 115 years of their existence.

Early Days

When Clanton was young, the streets were a bit different than they are today. In 1910, if you travelled south on Eighth Street past the "Methodist Episcopal Church" (now Clanton FUMC), at Second Avenue North you would dead-end right into the old original hotel. Eighth Street ended there until the 1950s. This large, two story, wood frame hotel stood in what is now the middle of Eighth Street on the south side of Second Avenue North. This hotel had 25 rooms and went by several names in its lifetime. It was built in March 1906 for W. M. Wilson and was first operated by experienced hotelier Oliver Elliott Latham and his wife Mary Frances Palmer Latham. O. E. Latham had run a hotel in Maplesville (1898) and the Thornton Hotel in Clanton beginning in November 1901.

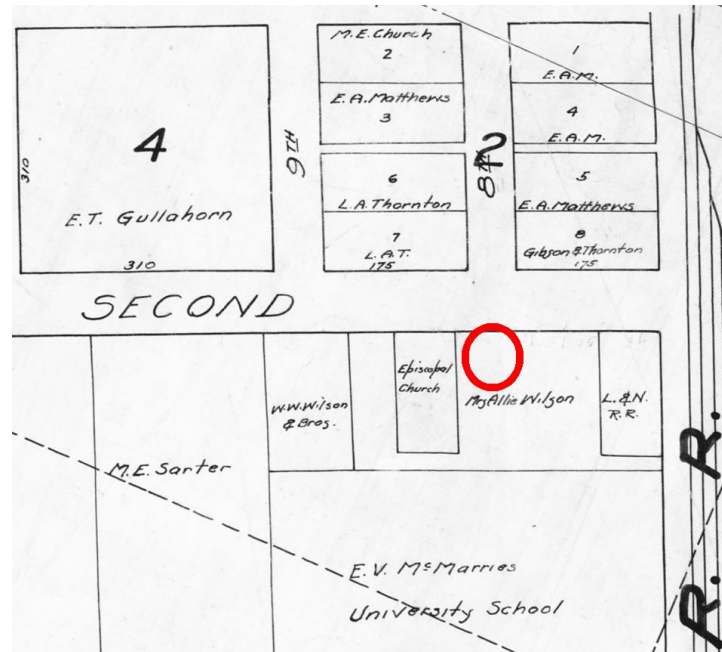


Postcard for the Hotel Elliot postmarked 1908

While the hotel and property was owned by the Wilsons, the running of the hotel was a different family's affair. It may have been briefly called The Clanton Hotel while O. E. Latham was the first proprietor in March 1906. By July it was called The Hotel Wilson and managed by Miss Nannie J. Duke. In October of 1906 it was leased to T. L. Carter and J. P. Elliott of Birmingham and the J. P. Elliott family ran it and, by at least May 1907, it was called the Elliott Hotel. A new postcard was published listing it as such (see above). By the end of 1908 the name changed again and it was called the Palmer Hotel (also sometimes the Palmer House). At this time it was being run by Virginia Z. Morgan Palmer, wife of John Franklin Palmer. He was Mary Palmer Latham's brother. The 1910 Federal Census shows the Palmer family and many boarders living there, including Abe Kanter (that's another story).

History of Clanton's Hotel on the Hill – Elliot/Palmer/Wilson/Thomason/Willingham/Dewitt/Clanton

Looking further back, to the maps from the second incorporation of Clanton in 1897, the property before the Hotel was built is shown. The property is owned by the Wilson family and the map below shows the location of the Episcopal Church and L. A. Thornton's boarding house. The map was drawn prior to the construction of L. H. Reynolds' store and the hotel.



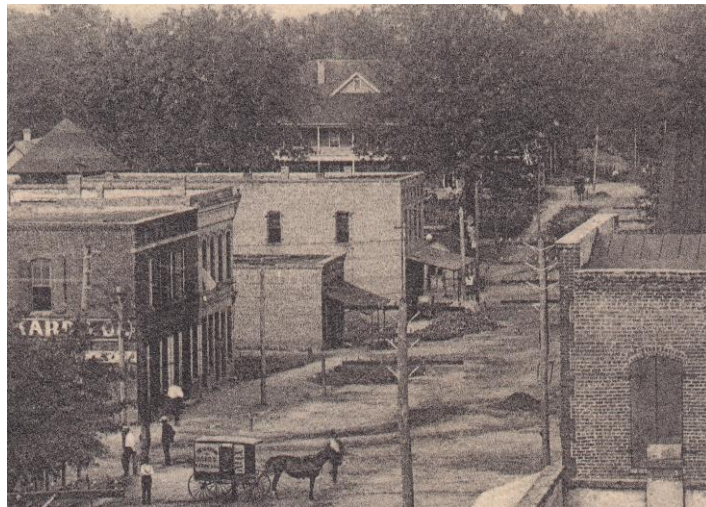
Clanton 1897 map: Wilson property, Episcopal Church, L. A. Thornton's lot, prior to Palmer Hotel, Reynolds' store being built.

In the August 25, 1910 issue of The Clanton Press there is an article entitled, "Whom I Met in Clanton," by a "roving reporter" named Mary T. Whitson (reprinted in the Chilton County Historical Society Newsletter October, 1984). It is one article in a series documenting her travels through the county. She states "*Clanton has got the best hotel in Alabama, the Hotel Palmer. Mrs. Palmer sets before her guests the most palatable cooking I ever ate. The hotel is in the loveliest place in Clanton. The dining room is always full and the spacious galleries always crowded. She is a gracious landlady.*"

History of Clanton's Hotel on the Hill – Elliot/Palmer/Wilson/Thomason/Willingham/Dewitt/Clanton



In late 1908 it is renamed to the Palmer House or Palmer Hotel



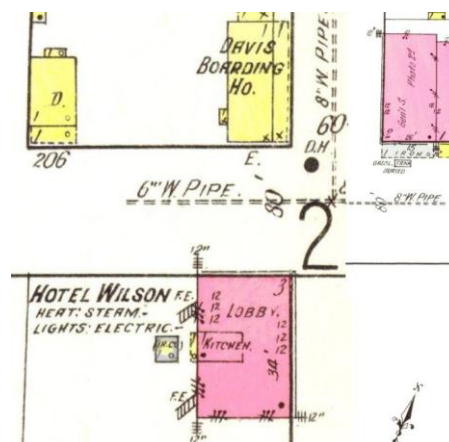
A view of it in the distance from downtown Clanton (taken from the 1896 courthouse's tower)



A view from 3rd Ave N looking back to the hotel (just to the right of the brick grocery), FUMC on right.

Calamity Strikes!

Tragically, the Palmer House/Hotel burned on Saturday January 30, 1915, at 3 A.M. The fire also destroyed the old Episcopal Church building and the Davis Boarding House (exact location unknown); all of which were apparently on the south side of 2nd Avenue North. In the book, A History of the Episcopal Church in Clanton and Chilton County, Alabama (by William M. King, Trinity Episcopal Church, 2013), the author states, “In 1883, an Episcopal mission was established at Second Avenue and Ninth Street in Clanton on a lot adjacent to the two-story, wood-framed Wilson Hotel ... A small wooden church was built on the property in 1888 or 1889.” The church congregation was dormant at the time of the fire. The “old Thornton Hotel” was saved; it was on the northwest corner of Second Avenue North and Eighth Street, across 8th Street from L. H. Reynolds’ store. The February 4, 1915 Clanton Press article says the fire started in the attic (third floor) and discovered by Night Marshall H. C. Martin.



Left: Looking north down 8th St. from 2nd Ave N, “old Thompson Hotel” left, Reynolds’ store right. Right: 1917 Sanborn Map

From the 1917 Sanborn Map, it appears that the Davis Boarding House may have moved into the “old Thornton Hotel” building after the fire.

Back From the Ashes

The burned hotel was rebuilt by Peyton D. Wilson and William S. Wilson, Jr. (using contractor Walter Longcrier) as a three story brick building with 50 rooms. It reopened in May 1915¹ as “The New Hotel Wilson.” The location was moved slightly west, probably so that Eighth Street could later be continued southward. By comparing the 1897 and 1917 maps, it appears that the new brick hotel building location encompassed the lot of the old Episcopal Church. The Palmer family kept the management responsibilities despite the name change. Tax records show Wilson paying property taxes at least through 1922.

¹ Clanton Press 5/13/1915



The New Hotel Wilson, 1915, photo from the 1916 CCHS Cantrolla.

Changing Hands

By March 7, 1917 the hotel furnishings and equipment of the New Wilson Hotel were purchased from Mrs. J. F. Palmer by Mr. J. Q. Wade. It seems from other documents that Mr. Wade ran another hotel prior to this, named The Wade Hotel, at least from 1911 through 1918. Mr. Jim Wade remembered stories that his grandmother ran a boarding house out of her home until the Hotel was purchased. According to a January 1919 UB article, Mr. Wade was selling the hotel.

At least through 1928 it was again called The Wilson Hotel. The Sanborn Fire Maps of 1917 and 1928 both show the same layout for the hotel, and both maps call it Wilson. The maps indicate a three story (12' each story) brick building.

In June of 1936 Mr. Thomason from Cullman took over management of the Wilson Hotel. At some point it became known as the Thomason Hotel, and, in 1938, was managed by Raymond Mims. It was named The Thomason Hotel until it was purchased by Rev. Dr. Guy Shields around June, 1943. He converted it to a religious training school called the Shield of Faith Bible Institute.

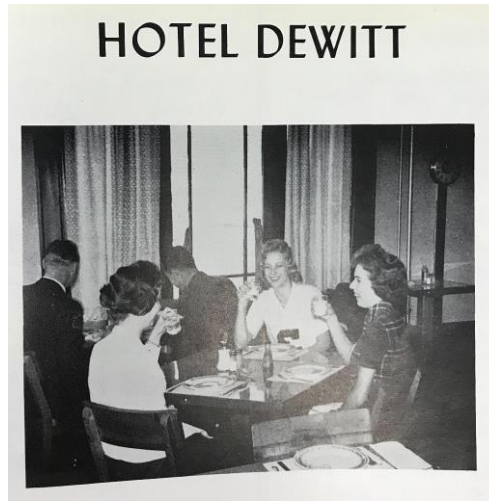
A Union-Banner article, March 7, 1946, says that Jimmie Bell (Bell Hardware) bought the hotel from Dr. Guy Shields, who was moving his Faith Bible Institute to Texas. The building had not been a hotel since 1943. Mr. Bell was going to use the first floor to display his large hardware and the upper floors as apartments.

Mr. Bell's plans must have changed, because on Sunday, November 24, 1946, from 3:00 P.M. until 8:00 P.M., the "Willingham Hotel" had its formal opening under the new management of Mr. G. O. "Buddy" Willingham of Montgomery. It was remodeled with new fixtures and all woodwork and floors redone. The Coffee Shop was to open later.

The year 1955 opened with the property under new ownership. Mr. John M. Higgins purchased it from Mr. Jimmie Bell. The article in the January 27, 1955 Union-Banner says "*the fixtures of the hotel had already been bought from Buddie Willingham by Mr. and Mrs. L. M. Stewart who recently moved here from Montgomery. Mr. Stewart works with the Ballard Clanton Fertilizer*

Company. They had already leased the building from Mr. Bell, and that lease will be honored and carried on by Mr. Higgins.” The article discusses other buildings in the area and says that “these developments present the need for streets to be opened up over the area between the railroad and Enterprise Road. Eventually Eighth Street will be extended on south to the Poley Bridge swamp, opening up a large area for light industries. Of course lateral streets will also eventually be built as they are needed.”

In May of 1960, it was renamed Hotel Dewitt from Willingham and was operated by Dewitt Easterling for one to three years.



L-R: Becky Cole, Joyce Lawrence, Becky Ellison. Notice the window trim was the same as today.

Here's a memory from Mr. Easterling's cousin, Colyn Moatts:

When I was either age 14 (1959) or age 15 (1960), I worked that summer for a Mrs. Wright at the old Clanton Peach-Packing Shed that was located on the west side of the railroad and just south of the at-grade at crossing of Second Avenue.

When the Peach Shed's evening "lunch" hour came around, several of us would walk up the hill to the DeWitt Hotel (formerly the Willingham Hotel), where my cousin DeWitt Easterling served a mighty fine 'family style' dinner in his restaurant on the hotel's ground floor.

I recall that he had several large, round tables that could accommodate 10 or 12 folks. And DeWitt's staff would always bring out bowls of fresh-cooked corn, peas, Lima beans, squash, mashed potatoes, etc., as well as large trays of hot fried chicken, ham, or pot roast. And he always served fresh-sliced onions and home-grown tomatoes, plus all the cornbread and iced sweet tea anyone might want. Lest we forget, there was usually fresh-baked peach cobbler or apple pie for dessert.

I don't recall the amount DeWitt charged for a meal, but it was considered by us to be very reasonable; after all, we were just kids, but we were making a whopping wage of \$1.00 per hour at the Peach Shed.

I wish I could tell you more about DeWitt, but he was not of my generation, and I didn't get to know him really well. I know he lived in the large, old house (on the south side of Second Avenue South, just across the street from the old high school). I also seem to recall a story that he was sent home from World War I duty due to a severe case of the flu.

The last reference found of the Hotel DeWitt was a note in an April 1961 Union Banner.

Hotel Clanton

An article in the Chilton County News on 11/21/1963 about Jack Mims' Grocery store says it is across from the "Hotel Clanton." Tax records for 1964-1966 also list Hotel Clanton.

More Recent Years

John Higgins used part of the building for his office space and other ground floor offices were rented in later years.

In November 2006 arson severely damaged the interior. A fire was set on the ground floor and much of the remodeled interior was destroyed but the structure remained intact.

On May 22, 2008, the Willingham Hotel was listed on the Alabama Historical Commission's Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.

In 2022 one of John Higgins' daughters, Sallie, formed a nonprofit organization with plans to reinvent the old hotel and surrounding properties and called it Homegirl Industry. *"Homegirl Industry is an upcoming hub of services and training and a lot more. Our focus is on hands-on work experience, building integrity, discovering hidden talents, education, positive integration with the local community, program sustainability, and most importantly, providing transitional housing. We are building strong partnerships with community leaders in the state of Alabama and beyond."* It is planned to *"be both a place of public socializing and enjoyment (the restaurant, downstairs) and a place that helps young women in need, with housing on the top two floors."* And it *"will provide opportunity for computer labs, drama & art therapy, fitness, creative & educational activities, event space for our own fund-raising,"* etc.