

# The Chatham Historical Journal

Volume 10, Number 2

Chatham County, North Carolina

October 1997

Chatham County's "Especial Artist" of 1865

## John L. Cowan

Herbert Poole\*

In 1865 John L. Cowan wrote by hand two documents that miraculously survived the wrecker's ball over one hundred years later. One of them contains perhaps the earliest depiction of two Chatham County structures on the Haw River. Although I have found no further examples of Cowan's early journalistic creativity, for more than a quarter century I have been intrigued by Cowan's art and what might possibly have become of him. In 1995, assisted by research support from Guilford College, I set out to search for John Cowan's "footprints" in time.

### The "Illustrated Sun"

Readers of the *Chatham Historical Journal* may recall a pen-and-ink sketch of Bynum's bridge and mill published in an article entitled "Bygone Mills on the Haw River in Chatham County."<sup>1</sup> As noted in the caption accompanying it, the sketch appeared in the pages of "one of two known issues of a charming handwritten document [in newspaper format entitled

*\*Herbert Poole, Ph.D., director of Hege Library, Guilford College, Greensboro, was reared in Pittsboro.*

"The Illustrated Sun"] by someone named John Cowan, who was likely staying in Pittsboro during a part of the year 1865."

The two issues of John Cowan's "newspaper" known to exist are dated Monday, 28 August 1865, and Monday, 11 September 1865. That there were other issues is evident from the designations "Vol. 1, No. 3", and "Vol. 1, No. 4". The earlier issue is at present the property of the Greensboro Historical Museum in Guilford County, North Carolina, while the later issue is the property of the author.

Practically nothing is known about how these documents survived. Both were discovered in the late 1960s and were offered for purchase to the author by a collector, now deceased, who stated that they had been rescued "along with a box of other things" from the attic of a Raleigh residence that had been demolished. What the "other things" were or whose house was demolished are not known; however, it is my guess that the house was the residence of Claudius Baker Denson, whose wife was John L. Cowan's sister.

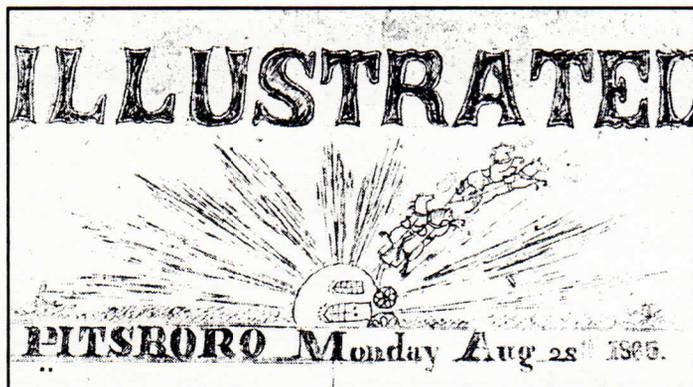
Both issues of the extant copies of "The Illustrated Sun" bear somewhere in their pages the signature of John L. Cowan, who describes himself on the front page of the August issue as "editor, publisher and proprietor." That his middle initial was an "L" and not an "S," as originally believed, was substantiated in



Photo courtesy of the author

recent years by records of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Pittsboro<sup>2</sup> and by a photograph in the Denson papers at the North Carolina archives.<sup>3</sup> The photograph shows a child identified on the verso thereof as John L. Cowan, Jr., and is dated 23 March 1881; the handwriting appears to be the same as that of the pages of "The Illustrated Sun."

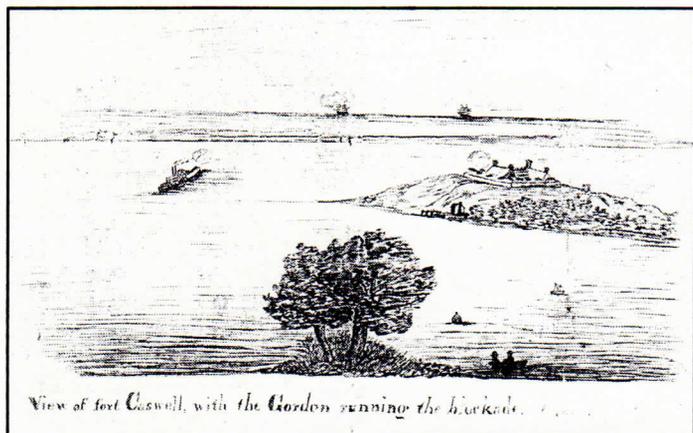
The contents of each issue appear to be the pastime creation of a young person, and John London Cowan was 20 years old in 1865. Each issue appears under a



Courtesy of Greensboro Historical Museum

sketched masthead, with some slight variation because both were drawn freehand by the "especial artist," as Cowan described himself in the caption of the drawing of Bynum's mill and bridge. One issue misspells the name of Pittsboro by omitting one of its Ts. The "Editor, publisher, and proprietor" explains in an opening paragraph, "Accidents will happen, we are sorry it . . . [line obliterated by fold] caused us so many bitter moments. In the present instance an irretrievable accident has happened to our paper. Irretrievable we say because the paper we print on is very scarce. The accident is this . . . being crowded at the time we were printing, Pittsboro we wrote minus one T."

Each issue also contains two pen-and-ink sketches. The August issue has a sketch of Fort Caswell with "the Gordon running the Blockade" and a sketch of an Indian sniper aiming at several men in an open boat,



View of fort Caswell, with the Gordon running the blockade.

Courtesy of Greensboro Historical Museum

used to illustrate a story appearing on the same page under the title, "IOTA, A Story by the Editor of the Sun."



The Guillotine. From the sketch of a family of . . .  
Photo courtesy of the author

The issue for September contains an illustration of a street scene with guillotine in a French village as well as the sketch of Bynum's bridge and mill.

#### John London Cowan

John London Cowan was the third child and second of four surviving sons of Thomas Cowan Jr. and Mary Ashe London. Prior to their move to Pittsboro in 1862<sup>4</sup> the Thomas Cowans were residents of Wilmington and owners of a plantation at Old Town, near present-day Southport, willed them by Thomas Cowan Sr.<sup>5</sup>

Locating information about John London Cowan beyond his immediate family proved difficult. "The Illustrated Sun" shows that he was in or near Pittsboro in 1865, and the U.S. Census of 1870 lists him as living in Pittsboro in the home of his father (dwelling 111, Centre Township), having "no occupation." In all likelihood, the family was living in this dwelling in 1865, three years after their relocation from Old Town. In the U.S. Census of 1880, John L. Cowan was no longer listed as a resident of Chatham county.

A key to the location and reconstruction of the life of John London Cowan after 1870 was found nearly by accident in an ambiguous newspaper account of the death by suicide of his younger brother, Henry Mauger (Moe-zhay) Cowan. According to the *News & Observer* for Sunday morning, 30 August 1896, Henry was "educated in Pittsboro and afterward went to Alabama where he was city editor of a newspaper in Opelika." The account notes that one brother was "a prominent contractor in Alabama" and that another brother, R. H. Cowan, "was the editor and proprietor of the *Durham Globe*." Through a process of elimination, I concluded with some certainty that the "prominent contractor in Alabama" was John London

Cowan, early Chatham County sketch artist and "publisher" in 1865 of "The Illustrated Sun." The search for John Cowan then moved to Alabama.

Research in Lee County, Alabama, revealed that John Cowan and another man whose surname was Strange appeared in Opelika as editor and proprietor of the *Opelika Weekly Observer*, the first issue of which was published by them on 17 October 1872.<sup>6</sup> Two years after being listed as having "no occupation" in Chatham County, John Cowan was gainfully employed in a profession for which he had already shown talent. He was 27 years old.

Lee County records also show that on 3 September 1874 John Cowan was married to Julia E. Barnett of Opelika in Emmanuel Episcopal Church by its rector, the Rev. J. H. Tichnor.<sup>7</sup> Cowan subsequently served on the vestry of this church for many years.<sup>8</sup> John and Julia Cowan had ten children, of whom five survived. Eight of the known children were Thomas, b. 24 June 1876; Lucy, b. 1878?; John London, b. 13 April 1879; William, b. November 1881; Robert, b. July 1884; Mary London, b. June 1888; George Everhart, b. 29 April 1892; and Julia Barnett, b. 16 October 1893.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently, Henry Mauger Cowan removed to Opelika for a time to work on his brother's newspaper. By the time of Henry's death in 1896, however, John was known publicly as a "prominent contractor." On 18 February 1901 Cowan posted bond as a county surveyor in Lee County.<sup>10</sup> On 4 August of that year John Cowan died of peritonitis associated with appendicitis.<sup>11</sup> His body was interred at Rosemere Cemetery in Opelika, where his wife was buried following her death thirteen years later, on 12 September 1914.<sup>12</sup>

John London Cowan's obituary appeared on the front page of the *Opelika Industrial News* on 9 August 1901. Among his professional activities in Opelika, the paper stated, was a survey of the railway line from Opelika to Birmingham. He was described in the closing lines of the obituary as:

*... the projector of many enterprises, some of which failed through no fault of his. He was progressive, intelligent, genial, generous, such a man as the community cannot well afford to lose.*

John London Cowan was obviously a man of substance and of character, and at least one of his "footprints" left a legacy which, though scant, is something nonetheless precious and significant. The "especial artist" of 1865 appears to have led an honorable and fruitful life and left a small memento of the observations of his youth in Chatham County.

#### The Cowan Family

John London Cowan's grandfather, Thomas Cowan Sr., was born on 22 September 1767 in Delaware and

moved to Brunswick County, North Carolina, where he married Elizabeth Sage of Onslow County. Elizabeth died on 30 September 1796, having borne one son, John Cowan.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Sr. then remarried, to Sarah Sage, sister of his first wife, and she bore him four children, of whom the second surviving son was Thomas Cowan Jr., whose second marriage was to Mary Ashe London.<sup>14</sup>

Mary Ashe London's father, John London (1747-1816), was an English immigrant who settled in Wilmington about 1765. Though he returned to England in order to avoid the American Revolution, John London came again to the United States and made several attempts to regain confiscated property and citizenship, succeeding in 1779. By 1812 he was magistrate of police in Wilmington.<sup>15</sup>

John London Cowan's immediate family group was as follows:

Father: Thomas Cowan Jr., b. 11 October 1803,  
d. 26 May 1883

Mother: Mary Ashe London, daughter of John London and Ann Thorney Mauger, b. 8 June 1814,  
d. 18 April 1880

Thomas Cowan Jr. and Mary Ashe London were married on 17 December 1834 in St. James Episcopal Church in Wilmington.

Children of Thomas and Mary:

Margaret Matilda Cowan, b. 28 January 1836,  
m. Claudius Baker Denson, 4 January 1863,  
d. 7 March 1923

Thomas Cowan, b. 8 April 1839, d. 5 October 1862

John London Cowan, b. 16 August 1841,  
d. 22 August 1842

John London Cowan, b. 29 July 1845, d. 4 August 1901\*

Robert H. Cowan, b. 30 July 1849, m. Ida Haughton of Pittsboro

Sara Sage Cowan, b. 1852?, m. John Christopher James of Wilmington, d. 3 March 1939

Henry Mauger Cowan, b. 4 November 1864, d. 30 August 1896

\*Note: John London Cowan was the second son of Thomas and Mary to bear a name which the parents apparently greatly wished to keep in the family. The younger brother lived only one year and six days. John's father Thomas was similarly the second Thomas in his family, being given the name of an older brother who had died in 1799 at the age of thirteen months.

Cowan's sister Matilda was married to Claudius Baker Denson; they were listed as living next door to the Cowan family in the 1870 census. As a young man, Claudius Denson attended Virginia Collegiate and Military Institute in Portsmouth, and in 1858 founded and became commander of the first military school in North Carolina, the Franklin Military Institute, located near Faison in Duplin County.<sup>16</sup> In

1861 he was elected commander of the "Confederate Greys" and subsequently served in Co. A, 2nd Regiment, Confederate Corps of Engineers.<sup>17</sup> Following the Civil War, Denson established a botanical nursery and served as headmaster of the Pittsboro Scientific Academy in 1886.<sup>18</sup> In 1887 Claudius and Matilda Cowan Denson moved to Raleigh, and it is the close family connection that led me to believe that the issues of "The Illustrated Sun" most likely were salvaged from their house when it was demolished many years later.

John Cowan's brother Thomas was a graduate of the University of North Carolina, class of 1858. He studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1860.<sup>19</sup> A volunteer in the Wilmington Light Infantry following Governor Ellis's call for troops, Thomas was commissioned a second lieutenant in Co. B, 3rd Regiment, North Carolina State Troops.<sup>20</sup> He suffered critical wounds at the Battle of Antietam on 17 September 1862 and died several days later.<sup>21</sup>

In 1870 John's brother Robert H. Cowan, then age 20, was listed in the census as living in his father's home and, like John, having "no occupation." Later, like his brother and some of his cousins, Robert became a newspaper publisher.<sup>22</sup> Robert and his wife, Ida Haughton, who in 1867 was a student at the Locust Hill Female Seminary in Pittsboro,<sup>23</sup> spent portions of their married lives in various towns around the state. For some period, Robert served as editor of the *Anson Times*. In 1895 he and Ida were living in Durham, where he was editor, proprietor, and revivor of the *Durham Globe*. Robert, known as "R.H.," also served at one time as secretary to the State Democratic Executive Committee.<sup>24</sup>

John's sister Sara Sage Cowan was listed in the U.S. Census of 1870 as living in the home of her father and "attending school." She married a Wilmingtonian and is buried in Wilmington at Oakdale Cemetery.<sup>25</sup>

Henry Mauger London was reported to be active in several lodges in Raleigh and employed for fifteen years in the state treasury. His death by suicide at age 42 followed a period of poor health. Henry is buried in the family plot at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal cemetery in Pittsboro.

#### NOTES

1. Herbert Poole, "Bygone Mills on the Haw River in Chatham County," *Chatham Historical Journal*, 8, no. 3 (1995): [3].
2. Register, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Pittsboro.
3. Claude B. Denson Papers, 1850-1944, North Carolina Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina.
4. William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 2 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 55.

5. New Hanover County, North Carolina, Will Book AB: 274.
6. Rhonda Coleman Ellison, *History and Bibliography of Alabama Newspapers in the Nineteenth Century* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1954), 150.
7. Lee County, Alabama, Marriage Record - White, 1871-1875, p. 349.
8. Emmanuel Church Records, Auburn University Archives, Auburn, Alabama.
9. *Opelika [Ala.] Industrial News*, 9 August 1901; Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Parish Register.
10. Lee County, Alabama, Official Bonds, Book C, 91.
11. *Opelika Industrial News*, 9 August 1901.
12. *Opelika Daily News*, 14 September 1914; Annette J. Seagrave, Auburn, Alabama, letter to author, 3 September 1996.
13. Repiton-Lamb Family Papers, Collection No. 179, East Carolina University Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.
14. *Raleigh Register*, 30 December 1834.
15. Opal London Cox (Arthur), *200 Years of London Family in America*, Bi-Centennial Edition (n.p., 1976), 142; also, Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4, 87-88.
16. Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4, 87-88.
17. Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861 - '65* (Goldsboro, N.C.: E. M. Uzzell, 1901), vol. 2, 111-127, and vol. 4, 409-432.
18. Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 2, 55.
19. Denson Papers.
20. Louis Manarin, ed., *North Carolina Troops, 1861 - 1865: A Roster*, vol. 3 (Raleigh: Dept. of Archives and History, 1971), 501-502.
21. Denson Papers.
22. *Durham Globe*, 1 August 1895. One of the cousins, Henry Armand London, was founder and publisher of the *Chatham Record* (Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4, 85-86.
23. "The School Girl," Pittsborough, N. C., March 1876, in Denson Papers.
24. *Durham Globe*, 1 August 1895.
25. Records of Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, North Carolina.
26. *Raleigh News and Observer*, 30 August 1896.

The **Chatham Historical Journal** is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. Its purpose is to disseminate items of historical interest about Chatham County. To be considered for publication, articles or photographs should be previously unpublished, of reasonable length, and include detailed sources of information. Implied copyright of published articles is reserved for the author.

Correspondence should be addressed to the Secretary, CCHA, Box 913, Pittsboro, N.C. 27312.