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Howell House Dedication

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History of Howell Family and House

Diane Moore

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Howell Family and Howell House History

By Diane Moore, Semmes Historic Committee Revised May 2022

Somehow, someone forgot the painstaking work of recording the history of Semmes, an expanding city approximately ten miles northwest of Mobile. It was named Semmes after the famed Admiral Raphael Semmes and began to prosper after Northern visitors began to settle here to take advantage of the long growing season. According to local residents, two trains crept through the area way back in the 1900s. It was a very simple, pioneer life with no electricity and no running water. Instead, there were plenty of fireplaces, wood cook stoves, and hand pumps near the back steps to pump water when needed. There was also a grocery market, a post office, and a two-story Semmes (Funk) Hotel which served traveling salesmen and any out-of-towners.

Residents traveled by foot, wagons, and horses, as few persons owned cars and even fewer traveled the dirt Moffett Road, now known as Highway 98. As long-time resident and nursery owner, Pauline Dodd (Mrs. Tom Dodd, Sr.), recalled in a *Mobile Press-Register Port City '78* article on August 6:

“One car came through fairly regularly—a Stutz...Mama would say, ‘Don’t get near that road—Mr. Luce (from Lucedale) will be flying by here in a minute.’” Flying meant he was going about 30 miles per hour.

Very limited bus service for the area was in place around 1918, and Albert Funk, the owner of the Funk Hotel, provided taxi service to downtown Mobile. He dropped off customers early in the morning and picked them up around 5 p.m. Being a dirt road, this 10-mile automobile trip was not without its problems, including sand ruts and washed-out road conditions.

Even though cars were scarce in the 1920s, the need to fill the tanks and work on automobiles was met by Curtis (Curt) Howell. He owned and operated Semmes’ first gas station on Moffett Road, starting off the business in a barn.



Image of barn used as the gas station.



Image of automobiles lined up in front of Semmes Garage waiting to be serviced.

Curtis (Curt) Herman Howell was a descendant of a long line of Howells who settled in the Allentown Cemetery area on Howells Ferry Road with two 40-acre plots in 1840, starting with great-grandfather Benjamin Howell, his grandfather James Thomas Howell, and Curt's father, James Benjamin Howell. Born on August 14, 1896, Curt was a jack-of-all-trades kind of man. He worked hard and was both self-employed and employed by others. He married Bertha Nettie (Joyner) Howell in Mobile County in 1914. Transplants from Illinois, Bertha's parents, Jerome and Bertha Joyner, settled their family around the area on what is now called McCrary Road in 1904. Curtis and Bertha were parents to eight children: May, Curtis, Clifford, Elsie, Viola Bernice, Mavis W., Sylvester Arnell (Buster), and Lillie Olive. May, Curtis, and Clifford passed away as infants.



Curtis and Bertha Joyner Howell on their wedding day in 1914.



Howell family members L-R front: Mavis, Viola, Elsie. L-R back: Bertha, Sylvester (Buster), and Curtis. Semmes Garage is visible on the right.

Curtis and Bertha purchased what has become known as the Howell House around 1917. The Howell House is a quaint turn-of-the-century home that was built originally for the Marsh family circa 1897. The house then sat amongst 180 acres of tree-laden grounds. There is some difference of opinion about who built the home. Some give credit to a Mr. Strike while others say that Seeb McCrary was the builder, both local residents. The Howell House is characteristic of a farmhouse of the time period—oak trees in the front for shade, wood frame and painted white, wide front porch, natural materials, steep A-frame wood-shingled roof, huge loft, center hallway with rooms to the left and to the right, a dining area with built-in cabinetry, a fireplace, a hand water pump in the back, a kitchen with farmhouse sink, wood-burning stove, beadboard paneling, open shelving, and hardwood floors throughout. Part of the back porch was later enclosed to accommodate office space for Bertha's bookkeeping work.



Howell House in early 1920s.

As mentioned, Curtis Howell worked at many different types of jobs to support the family, but what he is most remembered for is owning the Semmes Garage which was conveniently located almost directly across the street from the Howell home. Galtex gas, Badger brand name tires, and hot lunches, supplied by Bertha, were available to community residents. Semmes Garage appeared to be a frequent hangout for some locals, as their parked, empty vehicles indicate. Curtis Howell later sold this business and was employed by Galtex Oil Company. In future years under the ownership of a Mr. Beeter, Semmes Garage became known as Semmes Mercantile.



Semmes Garage was a favorite gathering place. Semmes Garage was almost directly across from the Howell home.



Howell's Garden Center.

Around 1945 Curtis, along with his son Sylvester (Buster), established and operated Howell's Nursery. The nursery employed eight to ten employees and was located to the east of the house and included about 40 acres to the back of the residence. The Howell family also

established one of the first garden centers in Semmes. Located on Moffett Road just west of the Howell House residence, it was operated by Sylvester (Buster) Howell and Charles Barrios. Unique to the area, the garden center was a wood frame building with a concrete floor surrounded by windows for good lighting. Plants and garden-related gifts plus flower arrangements were available to customers. During this period of time, nurseries primarily grew ornamentals in the ground. The early to middle 1950s brought several freezes that damaged crops and resulted in a reduced market. In 1962 an extreme freeze hit Semmes, causing widespread damage and seeing Howell's Nursery phase out its operation.



Picture of Howell's Nursery, located to the east of the house and included about 40 acres to the back of the residence.

Starting with Curtis and Bertha Howell and their eight children, members of the Howell family lived in the Howell House from circa 1917 until 1994, 77 years. It was sold in 1994 to Semmes residents, Dr. Travis and Carol Goodloe because of Carol's interest in the historic home. In the past 28 years, the Howell House has been used as a rental property by a variety of businesses, including *Green House Antiques*, *The Learning Center*, *Sweet T's Hair Salon*, and currently, *The Twisted Branch*.



Current pictures of Howell House (The Twisted Branch retail shop).

The Howell House is a 125-year-old landmark that has changed colors, changed business names, changed products, changed focus but still sits on busy Highway 98 (Moffett Road). It is a proud home now surrounded by rapid growth in Semmes. Still owned by the Goodloe family as part of Sycamore Square LLC company, it is their desire that the Howell House be preserved as a landmark in Semmes history. We are grateful to both the Goodloe family and the City of Semmes for their appreciation of Semmes's heritage!

After a nomination application process by the City of Semmes Historic Committee, the Howell House was listed on the Alabama Register of Landmarks & Heritage by the Alabama Historic Commission on September 16, 2021. Today with the official Historic Plaque Unveiling Ceremony the City of Semmes has a unique opportunity to designate, honor, and promote this landmark property's historical significance and thereby, encourage its long-term preservation as an iconic piece of the Semmes landscape and the Semmes story since circa 1897. What a proud day for Semmes and surely makes life here more beautiful and more meaningful! It sends a clear and visible message that our past is valuable and worthy to be preserved!

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