
HILDEBRAND HOUSE

POLK COUNTY, TENNESSEE



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Prepared by the MTSU Center for
Historic Preservation



Submitted to:
The Raby Family
2023

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INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. The yellow box marks the location of the Hildebrand House. *Courtesy of ArcGIS Online.*

In May 2022, owners Hunter and Jessica Raby invited staff from the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) at Middle Tennessee State University to tour the historic Hildebrand House (35.130610, -84.684971), located at 759 Hildebrand Road in Polk County, Tennessee. At that point, the Rabys had purchased the property several months prior to our visit and had begun to repair and restore the home. The CHP offered to draft a historic context of the home for the owners to help correct some of the long-standing inaccuracies about the home's history.

One of those inaccuracies concerns the original owner of the home. Some twentieth- and twenty-first-century resources incorrectly named Peter Hildebrand as the builder and original occupant of the Hildebrand House. However, primary sources reviewed in the following pages indicate that Peter's brother, Michael Hildebrand and his family, were the original owners of the home. The 1836 evaluations of Cherokee property and documentation of improvements done by the United States government prior to the removal are key resources in determining the original owner. These documents list the monetary value of

Cherokee property that could not be moved west. In addition, they describe homes, outbuildings, and improvements belonging to each Cherokee family, illuminating the diversity of Cherokee life prior to removal. The evaluation for Peter Hildebrand describes his residence as a two-story, 30' x 40' hewed-log house with a brick chimney.¹ The evaluation for Michael Hildebrand describes his residence as a two-and-one-half-story, 42' x 25' frame dwelling house with "3 double Chimneys, 8 fire places, '36' '15' Light Windows" and a portico on the front.² The description of Michael's residence matches the size and construction method of the Hildebrand House today. In addition, John W. Hildebrand, son of Peter Hildebrand, stated that his birthplace and home until the journey west was known as Uwaga-hi, a settlement on the Ocoee River one mile northwest of Benton, Tennessee.³



Figure 2. The Hildebrand House is located on parcel 065 096.09, outlined in blue. *Courtesy of Tennessee Property Viewer.*

The Hildebrand House that is the focus of this study is located five miles south of Benton, Tennessee.⁴

Sometime in the late 1960s, Nell Thomas Williams and her husband Henry Alexander Williams, Sr., moved the historic Hildebrand House from its original location 350 yards to the south in order to remove it from the floodplain, avoid dust from the road, and create a more scenic and commanding view from the house over the surrounding fields and mountains. As happened too often to early Tennessee homes in the 1950s and 1960s, the Williams chose to “restore” the house by keeping several key architectural details and the general floor plan while modernizing its appearance with a new brick exterior. Thus, the historic frame home was moved and placed on a new foundation, its weatherboarding was removed, the exterior was covered in brick, the original rear ell was removed and replaced with a new rear ell that provided modern amenities, and new chimneys were built, all while keeping many of the home’s key architectural details. This action led to another inaccurate belief about the home’s history. Some thought that the Williams family built a brand-new house on the property using large portions of material salvaged from the dilapidated Hildebrand House.

When the Rabys stripped the home to the studs in 2022 to begin the repair-and-restoration process, however, the home’s historic, wood-pegged frame was uncovered. The historic Hildebrand House was not destroyed in the 1960s. Instead, the nearly 200-year-old home, constructed with care for the Michael Hildebrand family, was renovated and modernized, giving it a new brick exterior while maintaining the original heavy braced, pegged framing, the interior floorplan, and key architectural details, including all of the original wainscoting, some doors, most of the flooring, all but one mantel, the staircase (with the exception of the balusters, the starting newel post, and handrail), box stairs, window and door trim, and other architectural flourishes on the interior and exterior.

The Hildebrand House is one of only a small number of pre-removal Cherokee residences that remain in Tennessee. Through the Rabys’ efforts to repair and restore the home, salvaging as many of the architectural details as possible, the Hildebrand House will continue to stand as a symbol of a Cherokee family’s prosperity and perseverance through the adversity and division of removal.



Figure 3. Details of the historic pegged framing and exterior architectural elements.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

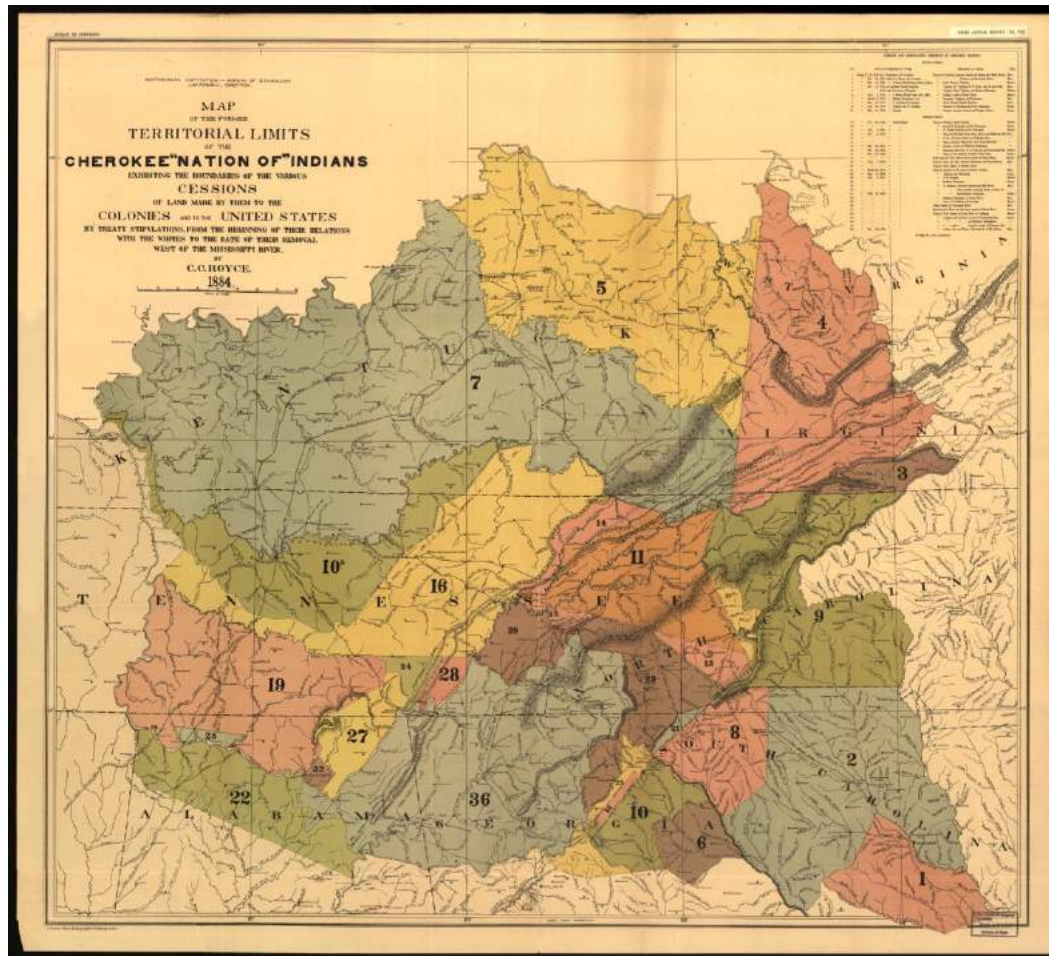


Figure 4. In 1721, Cherokee land comprised 124,978 square miles in eight middle Atlantic and southern states. Little by little, Cherokee lands systematically diminished through a series of 36 treaties negotiated over a period of 115 years. The final treaty, known as the Treaty of New Echota, was signed in 1835 and ceded the last 12,316 square miles of the Cherokee Nation east of the Mississippi River (labeled 36 on the map). *Source: Library of Congress.*

In the early nineteenth century, the United States government systematically removed southeastern indigenous people from their ancestral lands. In December 1835, a small group of Cherokee, led by Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot, and others, acting on their own and without the consent of Principal Chief John Ross and the Cherokee government, signed the Treaty of New Echota. The treaty outlined the conditions for the removal of the Cherokee from their remaining lands in western North Carolina, northern Georgia, southeastern Tennessee, and northeastern Alabama. In exchange for the Cherokee's land and five million dollars, the tribe would relocate to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. The great majority of Cherokee vigorously protested the treaty, considering it to be fraudulent. Federal officials ignored their protests, though, and the Treaty of New Echota was ratified by a single vote in the United States Senate.

The Cherokee were given until May 23, 1838, to remove voluntarily, but only about 1,681 left before the deadline.⁵ After the deadline passed, 7,000 federal troops and state militia, under the command of General Winfield Scott, forcibly gathered the Cherokee from their homes and marched them to one of three main emigrating depots in Tennessee and Alabama, where they were divided into detachments for their journey. The first three detachments,



Figure 5. Map of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. *Source: National Park Service.*

consisting of approximately 2,750 Cherokee, including a small number of Creek, left in June from the Ross's Landing emigrating depot in present-day Chattanooga, Tennessee, and traveled primarily by water. A severe drought made for a difficult journey with rough conditions. News of high numbers of desertions and fatalities quickly reached the Cherokee government. On July 23, the Cherokee Council petitioned the United States government to postpone removal until fall when the weather was more conducive to long-distance travel and to allow the Cherokee to control the remainder of their removal.⁶ Permission for both was granted provided that the Cherokee stay encamped near the emigrating depots until travel resumed in late August. When travel resumed, the remaining Cherokee were divided into

fourteen detachments that departed for the West intermittently from August through December 1838.

In 1987, Congress designated the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail to memorialize and promote a greater awareness of the Cherokee removal. Today, the trail includes a variety of landmarks and historic landscapes in nine states marked for visitation and remembrance. While each site provides a glimpse into this significant part of history, it is important to remember that the Trail of Tears began at the doorsteps of each Cherokee family. The Hildebrand House in Polk County, Tennessee, is one such place. This home, and its setting, tells the story of a prominent Cherokee family divided by the removal.

JOHN HILDEBRAND

The story of the Hildebrand House begins with John Hildebrand, Sr., son of George Michael Hildebrand and Anna Zimmerman. The Hildebrand family emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania between 1733 and 1740 and expanded their family over the years, with George and Anna welcoming John in February 1755 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.⁷ Little is known of John's first two decades of life. However, at age 25, he served as a soldier in Captain Faust's Company of the North Carolina Militia and participated in the Battle of Ramsour's Mill in present-day Lincolnton,

North Carolina on June 20, 1780. It was here that John lost his close friend Nicholas Warlick.

After the battle, John returned personal belongings to Warlick's widow, Barbara, and soon after, John and Barbara married. John and Barbara began growing their family with the birth of their five children: Michael (b. 1781/82), Peter (b. 1782), George (b. 1784), John (b. 1786), and Sarah (b. 1788). John also served as stepfather to Barbara's children with her former husband. For the first thirteen years of John and Barbara's marriage, they lived in North Carolina, where there is little information about John's life during this time.

It was not until 1794 that John, Barbara, and their children arrived in Knoxville, Tennessee, where land records show that John purchased lot 12 on Broad Street in the first business district of Knoxville. During their time in Knoxville, John and Barbara's marriage began to fall apart. Family letters speculate that the marriage began to dissolve when Barbara's father only included the children Barbara had with her previous husband in his will, purposely excluding the children that John and Barbara later had together.⁸ The couple reportedly separated, and Barbara returned to North Carolina. On March 1, 1797, John sold his lot in Knoxville and moved with his five children to the Cherokee Territory on the Hiwassee River about four miles north of present-day Benton, Tennessee. It was here that John opened a grist mill under contract from the United States government.⁹ While John worked towards financial prominence, his eldest son, Michael Hildebrand, followed in his father's footsteps and became a successful businessman and planter with extensive improvements in what is now Polk County.¹⁰

THE MICHAEL HILDEBRAND & NANCY MARTIN FAMILY

Michael Hildebrand was born in 1781 or 1782. He moved with his father, John Hildebrand, Sr., from his birthplace in North Carolina to Knoxville, Tennessee, eventually settling on the Hiwassee River in the early years of the nineteenth century. Michael married into a prominent and wealthy Cherokee family. His wife, Nancy Martin, was the daughter of Joseph Martin and Elizabeth Betsy Ward. Joseph Martin, otherwise known as General Joseph Martin, was appointed Agent and Superintendent of Cherokee Indian Affairs in 1777. Soon

after, Joseph met his soon-to-be wife, Elizabeth Betsy Ward, the daughter of the "Beloved Women of the Cherokees," Nancy Ward.¹¹

Following in his father's footsteps as a businessman, Michael established the Hildebrand Portage. In addition to the portage, he owned a mill and ferries on heavily used waterways connected to the Federal Road.¹² The Federal Road was a significant thoroughfare through Tennessee to Georgia, located directly adjacent to the land settled by Michael and Nancy. Thousands of travelers, missionaries, soldiers, settlers, drovers, and traders used the Old Federal Road. The road had initially been used solely by the Cherokee until Colonel Return Jonathan Meigs, the Cherokee Indian Agent, negotiated government use of the road with the Cherokee leaders.¹³ Once in full use, sometime around 1804, the road was used for military activity and as an extensive market route for food and livestock, increasing the success of Michael's ferry business and his wealth.

For the next several decades, Michael and Nancy continued to expand their wealth and grow their family near the Ocoee River. According to descendant David Hampton and John Hildebrand "Jack" Cookson's Eastern Cherokee Application, Michael and Nancy had twelve children: Elizabeth (Betsy), John, Jane, Margaret,

Delilah (Lila), Eliza, Stephen, Rachel, Nancy, Joseph, Brice, and Mary (Polly).¹⁴ The Hildebrand property operated as a working farm that provided grains and livestock to the surrounding area. The 1835 Cherokee census indicates that Michael Hildebrand's household consisted of 8 Cherokees, 1 "white connected through marriage (Michael), and 5 enslaved African Americans, who tended the fields, worked on Hildebrand's boatyard, and carried cargoes of the Tennessee-Hiwassee-Ocoee River flat-boat line over the portage to McNair's boatyard twelve miles south.¹⁵ The family had 228 acres of cultivated fields, producing 50 bushels of wheat and 2,000 bushels of corn. In addition, he had two mills and a ferry boat.

By the time Michael established his businesses and homestead, the Cherokees had ceded large portions of their lands, giving up much of their hunting territory and forcing them to change their traditional lifestyle. Historian William G. McLoughlin argues, "After 1805 the widely dispersed farms, with nuclear families, marked the beginning of the end of Cherokee communal life in the townhouse and the ceremonial square."¹⁶ As a result of the loss of their extensive land holdings and the adoption of Euro-American customs, many Cherokees turned to Euro-American style farming and community organization. By 1835, 97.2% of Cherokee households in Tennessee farmed.¹⁷ The average number of acres in cultivation for each farm was 26.194 with a total of 10,792 acres of cultivated land in East Tennessee.¹⁸ In the same year, the Cherokees in East Tennessee produced 976 bushels of wheat (39% of the total for the entire Cherokee Nation) and 129,179 bushels of corn (22.9% of the total for the entire Cherokee Nation).¹⁹ 86,224 of those bushels of corn were produced as surplus, which as geographer David M. Wishart notes, could have been used for a variety of purposes including, sale for income, redistribution to other households, a hedge against future crop failures, or livestock.²⁰ The Hildebrands had nearly nine times the cultivated acres as the average Cherokee farm. They sold some of their surplus wheat and corn for profit and provided some of it to those less fortunate in their community.

While the adoption of Euro-American-style agriculture was just one of the many markers of an evolving Cherokee society in the early nineteenth century, so too was the attainment of certain skills.²¹ By 1835, a majority of Cherokees produced mechanical arts (such as blacksmithing), weaving, and spinning. In addition, 74.1% of Cherokee households in East Tennessee contained an individual who was literate in either English or Cherokee (57.1% households



Figure 6. The Old Federal Road in front of the Hildebrand House, 2022.

contained at least one individual literate in Cherokee and 39.9% of households had an individual literate in English).²² The Hildebrand household had six members proficient in reading English and two members proficient in reading Cherokee. In addition, five were skilled in weaving and spinning, two served as farmers for the homestead, and one was a skilled mechanic.

The adoption of Euro-American customs and skills, along with varying degrees of wealth, were often contributing



Figure 7. Hildebrand House exterior, 1951. *Courtesy of Cleveland Bradley County Library History Branch.*

factors to the cultural and class divisions present in Cherokee society during the early nineteenth century and led to a three-tiered class system.²³ McLoughlin argues that “a small group of well-to-do, influential merchant-traders, large planters, slave owning farmers, and entrepreneurs” made up the top tier.²⁴ Although only 57 of the 424 Cherokee families in Tennessee in 1835 owned enslaved people, the adoption of plantation slavery was yet another example of an evolving Cherokee society that was evident in Cherokee communities in East Tennessee. In 1809, there were 583 enslaved African Americans in the Cherokee Nation.²⁵ By 1835, that number had nearly tripled to 1,592.²⁶ With a vast number of cultivated lands and high crop production, along with the ownership of five enslaved people in 1835 and eight in 1840, it is clear that Michael Hildebrand was among the wealthy and prominent “top tier” class within Polk County and the greater Cherokee society in East Tennessee.

THE HILDEBRAND HOUSE

Construction reportedly began in 1830 on a two-story, center-hall home for the Hildebrand family that reflected their wealth and status. Located on land directly adjacent to the Old Federal Road and the Ocoee River (parcel 065 096.09), the Hildebrand House was reportedly the first frame home built south on the Ocoee River in the Cherokee Nation. The 1836 Cherokee property evaluation described the home as “42 x 25, 2 ½ stories high, 5 rooms above and 5 below, 3 double Chimneys, 8 fire places, ‘36’ ‘15’ Light Windows, Portico in Front.”²⁷ The construction of the home was overseen by leading architect James Killian. In 1916, Mrs. Helen Nicholson, who was nearly a century old during the interview, remembered that her father, Robert Howell, did the masonry work on the Hildebrand House.²⁸ Sources indicate that Robert Howell also did the masonry work on the renowned Chief Vann House and the McNair House.²⁹ Polk County historian Roy G. Lillard noted, “The massive stones of the foundation and the rafters pinned together by wooden pegs testify to the expertness of the builders of this monumental building.”³⁰

George F. Mellen, a historian and professor at the University of Tennessee during the 1890s, admired the home’s architectural style. He stated, “There must have been intended some suggestion of baronial life lived along the Rhine. The

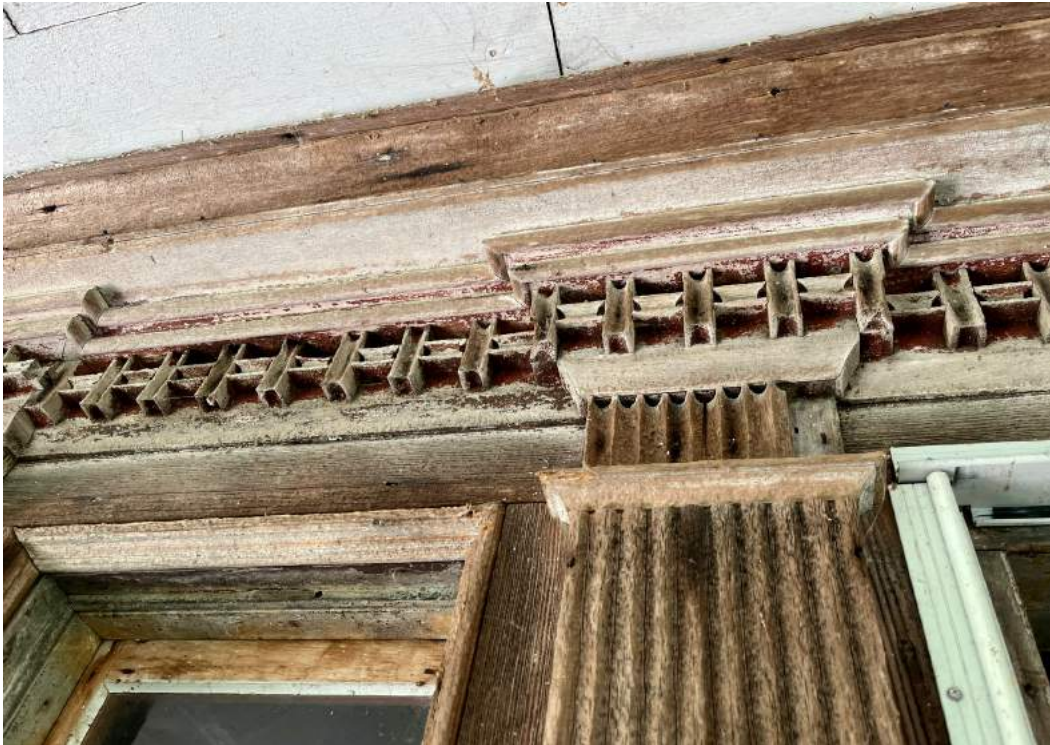


Figure 8. “H” trim on the exterior of the Hildebrand House mentioned in J. D. Clemmer’s description of the home, 2022.

proportions and appointments the house stood to the Ocoee River in the same relation as some ancient castle to the Rhine.”³¹ Mellen’s description reflects the architectural significance of the Hildebrand House that was acknowledged by many onlookers and local residents throughout the decades.

Mellen was not alone in his attempts to capture a detailed description of the home. J.D. Clemmer, Polk County educator and historian, also penned a description of the home in his scrapbook that detailed the unique features of the building:

The baseboards are 2 ½ feet wide solid walnut boards. The rafters in the house are of sawed timbers which are tied together with wooden pins,

*Moldings throughout the house, both exterior and interior, are covered with carved series of H's without breaks between the letters. Innovations were also made in the location of the kitchen, which was placed under the dining room, rather than some distance away as was the custom in those years.*³²

Mellen added in his description of the home:

Stone was quarried on the farm, and foundation walls two feet thick, about five feet on an average high, and extending over 300 feet around made full sized basements for the whole house, “L” and all. The smaller of the two large chimneys had three fireplaces, and was about ten feet across, reaching up past the basement, two stories, and full sized attic, and contained enough brick to build a small brick dwellings. The larger chimney, about fifteen wide, with two fireplaces on each floor, in room corners, would have made two brick dwellings of modern construction. The floor joints are 3 by 10 of hewed, heart pines, thirty feet long, making the larger section of the basement about thirty by sixty feet in one room. The rooms over it are 30 x 24 feet with a 12 foot hall between, and a partition thru the North one to the middle of the chimney. The



Figure 9. Examples of wood pegging in the house, 2022.



Figure 10. Examples of wood pegging in the house, 2022.

kitchen and dining room “L” had a secret cellar under the dining room, and the kitchen was of the basement and gallery style. The six by seven foot kitchen fire to cook on, had two giant cranes to swing the note over the fire. A dumb waiter, a car to carry the vessels of food along a track passing thru the closet beside the chimney into the dining room, enabled the “quality folks” being served without seeing the negro slave cooks who prepared the meals. Over the dining room mantel, a hewed panel of heart poplar yet shows 48 inches of width to the eye.³³

Mellon continued...

From the hall a stairway turns the corner to the upper hall, the railings of the stairway are sawed front one solid piece each, and then grains so as to appear bent, and with square turns of bent wood. The nearly inch thic[k] plaster was highly ornamented all over with what looks like ink work in crooked curved symmetrical lines. From the North Upper room, a narrow stairway leads into the attic, a full floored 80 x 60 foot one room place with windows at ends, where a Company of 100 soldiers could sleep. The open rafterwork, and windbeams, were 4 x 4 whip sawed pine, and are pinned together with



Figure 11. Staircase with some original elements during restoration, 2022.



Figure 12. Details of original decorative staircase during restoration, 2022.



Figure 13. Staircase and framing detail during the restoration, 2022.



Figure 14. Original framing exposed during the restoration, 2022.



Figure 15. Original door and trim detail, 2022.

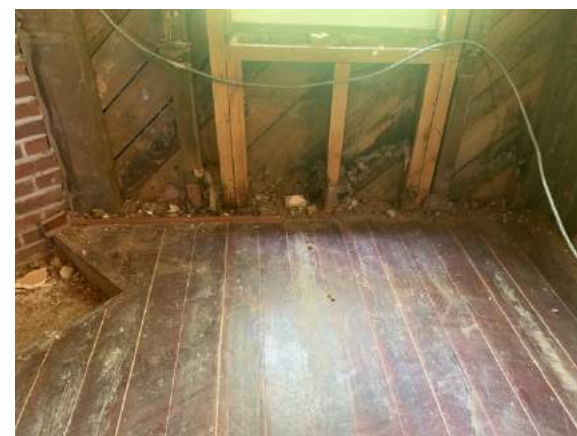


Figure 16. Original floor detail, 2022.



Figure 17. Box stairs detail, 2022.



Figure 18. Staircase and door to the third floor/attic, 2022.

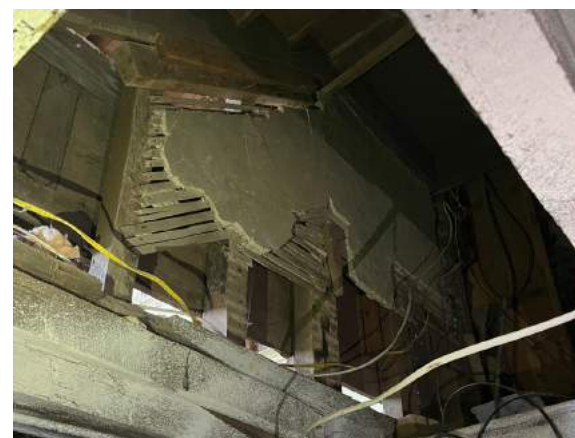


Figure 19. The last remaining original plaster can be seen from the basement looking up, 2022.

inch draw pins thru augur holes, in the same manner that the pine pole rafters and pine pole windbeams of 100 years usage in the David McNair brick on the Conassuga hold its roof together.³⁴

In addition to the main house valued at \$6,000 in 1836, Hildebrand's property included a two-story stone spring house, smoke house, barns, lumber house, corn crib, a log home and cabin, log kitchen, milk house, stable, two blacksmith shops, peach and apple orchards, and various other buildings on additional properties.³⁵ It is likely that some of the log cabins/homes noted in the 1836 property evaluation for Hildebrand housed the five enslaved people who tended the fields and worked at the family's businesses. None of the enslaved homes or outbuildings remain on the property today;



Figure 20. View of the landscape from the Hildebrand House property, 2022.

however, one of the log buildings from the property was moved near the town square in Benton, Tennessee, for preservation purposes in 1923.³⁶ Unfortunately, it no longer exists, but a description found in the Clemmer Scrapbooks notes the building had large-style rafters similar to the main house.³⁷ The Hildebrands' land holdings were extensive, and their improvements were valued at \$13,221 in 1836.

In addition to the house and improvements, the property also contained a cemetery. Various reports throughout the years mention the Hildebrand Cemetery but offer little information about those buried there. A Works Progress Administration (WPA) report completed in 1940 states that the cemetery was used by the Cherokee before white settlers occupied the land. At the time of the report, there was only one visible headstone, which was reportedly crudely inscribed with an illegible name.³⁸ In personal correspondence, researcher James O. Sanders stated that Dr. George F. Mellen located the cemetery in the early twentieth century and counted a minimum of 25 graves but Mellen suggested that there could be more than 50.³⁹ Mellen noted in a 1912 article for the *Knoxville Sentinel* that the



Figure 21. The spring associated with the historic Hildebrand Farm, located on a neighboring property that is separately owned. *Courtesy of Hunter Raby.*

cemetery had “uninscribed head and foot stones ... On one stone with great difficulty, might be deciphered ‘Joseph White or Whitson.’”⁴⁰ Another survey, published in 1993, seemingly confirms what Mellen saw and reported that Joseph “Whizken,” who did the fine rock work on the Hildebrand House, died while working on the property and is buried in the Hildebrand Cemetery.⁴¹ James Killian, the leading architect of the Hildebrand House, is also reportedly buried

in the cemetery. Today, the cemetery is located on a separate parcel from the house.

While it is commonly reported that the house took seven years to construct beginning in 1830, an August 15, 1836, letter written by Moravian Reverend Heinrich Gottlieb Clauder states that Michael Hildebrand “moved into a splendid new building just last winter.”⁴² Reverend Clauder penned his letter five months after the ratification of the Treaty of New Echota, and removal to the West was already on the minds of the Hildebrand family. Clauder noted that Michael was “planning to leave his beautiful place next fall and move to the new country.”⁴³ Although Michael may have planned to make the journey west with his family, and several secondary sources claim that he did, primary sources indicate that he stayed, while much of his family did indeed emigrate. In fact, several Hildebrands served as conductors and assistant conductors in detachments on the Trail of Tears, including Michael’s brother, Peter, who led the largest detachment west. But what would make Michael change his mind and stay?

In April 1837, Michael’s Cherokee wife, Nancy, passed away, and Michael remarried soon after. It is possible that this event swayed Michael to stay rather than remove. Regardless, the Hildebrands lost their extensive land holdings and improvements because of the Treaty of New Echota, but Michael was compensated \$13,221, the 1836 value of the family’s improvements. However, in 1852, Michael’s son-in-law, Isaac Mayfield, inquired whether Michael drew that money in his name or in the name of his wife or children and whether the children were entitled to it.⁴⁴ Isaac stated that his “father-in-law (M Hildebrand) refuses to pay the amount due my wife and he will settle in the Cherokee Country west of the Mississippi and I want to commence a suit against him before he moves as he has sold out his farm and will start about the 15th Oct.”⁴⁵ Although the answer to Isaac’s inquiry is unclear at this time, records indicate that Michael re-acquired his house and 400 acres of land after removal.

The Cherokee land in Tennessee that was ceded because of the Treaty of New Echota became known as the “Ocoee District.” Lucille McClure summarizes the process to file a land claim:

*To file a claim, anyone except a member of the Cherokee Nation could file within the first two months for a claim of 160 acres at the rate of \$7.50 per acre. Those with prior claims, known as occupants, had three months in which to file their claims. After the first five months, all claims could be made for 160 acres at \$5.00 per acre. At two-month intervals, the rate was reduced. At the end of nineteen months, all claims were reduced to one cent per acre or to the highest bidder. Some lands were sold for as little as one-fourth cent per acre and as high as \$105.00 per acre.*⁴⁶

There are five entries in the land records for Michael Hildebrand, totaling 400 acres of land in Range 2E, Township 1 (see Figure 22):

Tract 3304	40 acres	#7-NWSEq	6/2/1841
Tract 3057	80 acres	#7-S 1/2Seq	1/3/1841
Tract 3058	50 acres	#7-NEcSeq	6/3/1841
Tract 1974	80 acres	#17-E 1/2NWq	2/4/1840
Tract 3311	160 acres	#8-NEq	8/8/1841

The Hildebrand House is located on tract 1974. In addition to these records, Michael is also listed in the 1840 Census as living in Polk County, Tennessee with nine other individuals and eight enslaved African Americans, further indicating that he stayed rather than remove west.⁴⁷ Sources also indicate that Michael married Lucy Absher Whitson in about 1839. Lucy was the widow

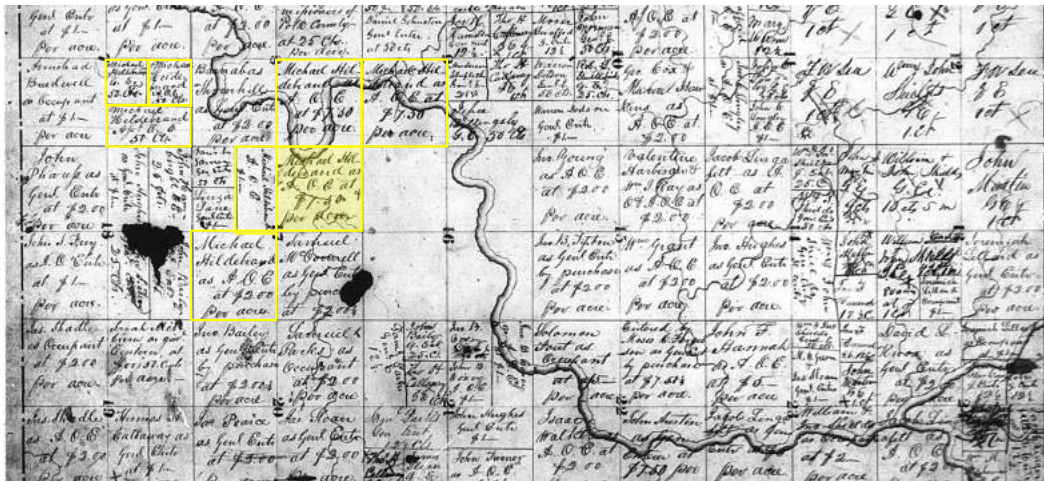


Figure 22. R2ET1, Ocoee District Plat detail. Areas highlighted in yellow are tracts of land acquired by Michael following removal. The area shaded in yellow is the tract of land that contains the Hildebrand House. Source: tngenweb.org.

of Joseph Whitson, the stonemason who died while building the Hildebrand House and who is believed to be buried in the Hildebrand Cemetery.

Although Michael re-acquired his house and 400 acres of land immediately following removal, relocating in the West remained on his mind. On June 22, 1843, Michael noted that he “now wishes to remove to Arkansas as a part of his family are in that Country,” in a letter inquiring if money for travel and subsistence were still available to him if he removed (see Figure 23).⁴⁸ It appears that Michael did not move west in the 1840s and instead focused on growing his farm. The 1850 agricultural census indicates that Michael was living in Polk County, Tennessee, with 300 acres of improved land and 800 acres of unimproved land. His farm was valued at \$10,000, with an additional \$200 of value in farming implements and machinery. He had 3 horses, 9 milk cows, 6 working oxen, 20 other cattle, 30 sheep, and 100 swine. In addition, the family raised 200 bushels of wheat, 800 bushels of corn, 200 bushels of oats, and 50 lbs. of tobacco.⁴⁹ The 1850 slave schedule also indicates that Michael owned eight enslaved people (four males and four females), ranging in age from 48 to 7 months.⁵⁰ Michael also appears in the 1851 Siler Roll and 1852 Chapman Roll of Eastern Cherokee entitled to and

Figure 23. Michael Hildebrand to J. H. Eaton and E. B. Hubley, June 22, 1843. Source: M234, Roll 116, National Archives and Records Administration (copy provided by Michael Wren).

receiving payment pursuant to an act of Congress in 1850, along with some of his younger children and their families.⁵¹

Sometime in the next decade, Michael did move to the West. According to an 1852 letter from Michael's son-in-law Isaac Mayfield, Michael had “sold out his farm and will start [traveling west] about the 15th of Oct.”⁵² He appears in the 1860

Census working as a farmer in the Canadian District of the Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory and died there three years later.⁵³

Due to a fire at the Polk County Courthouse, little is known about the Hildebrand House and property from the time Michael sold it and moved west until the turn of the twentieth century. Secondary sources report that Julius Eckhardt Raht owned the home and farm following Michael's departure, but it is unclear if Raht ever lived there. Some twentieth-century deeds even refer to the Hildebrand home and farm as the "Old Raht or Hildebrand farm."⁵⁴ Raht was born in Germany on June 26, 1826, and emigrated to the United States in 1850, arriving in nearby Ducktown in 1854. By age thirty-four, Raht was a well-known name in the region and was managing all the cooper mines and smelting works in Ducktown.⁵⁵

The only other notable mention of the Hildebrand property during the nineteenth century comes from Confederate soldier William Erskine Sloan, who initially served in the 3rd Tennessee Infantry Regiment and then the 5th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment. He mentioned the Hildebrand Ford in his diary. On August 16, 1864, Sloan wrote:

*We crossed Ocoee River at Haskins' Ford, and moved down the north side of the river to the Helderbrand Ford on the old Federal Road, and encamped. Thirty men of the Ninth Tenn. Battalion are here on picket duty. There is only three miles from my home, yet I dare not go home to stop over night for fear of the prowling enemy hid about the neighborhood. All of our men who can do so in safety are visiting their homes.*⁵⁶

POST-NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISTORY

A number of families owned the Hildebrand Home throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. In 1976, former Polk County historian Roy G. Lillard noted, "Near the turn of the century the Porter Kimbrough family occupied the home for more than twenty-one years. For approximately twenty years, the home was occupied by the John Gilbert family. In recent years the Bill Barnes and Bill Milen family made their home there."⁵⁷ An August 13, 2012, memorandum from Tennessee Historical Society (THS) Executive Director Ann Toplovich to the Board of Directors noted, "By the 1920s, the house had gone to Porter Kimbrough, and



Figure 24. Hildebrand House, 1957. Courtesy of Polk County, TN, Historical and Genealogical Society.



Figure 25. Hildebrand House, 1965. Courtesy of Polk County, TN, Historical and Genealogical Society.

then to John Gilbert in the late 1940s. A Terrell seems to have owned the farm at least briefly about 1960... It would appear from photographs that the Hildebrand House had been vacant for some time by 1961."⁵⁸



Figure 26. Hildebrand House, 1965. *Courtesy of Polk County, TN, Historical and Genealogical Society.*



Figure 27. Hildebrand House, 1965. *Courtesy of Hunter Raby.*



Figure 28. Nell and Henry Williams pose in front of the Hildebrand House during the home's relocation approximately one-quarter mile to the south of its original location, late 1960s. *Courtesy of Hunter Raby.*

Existing deeds note that T. L. and Julia Lowery, John M. Thomas, and G. H. Davis also owned the property over the years.

In 1961, 224 acres of the historic Hildebrand farm, including the Hildebrand House, was purchased by Nell Thomas Williams and her husband Henry Alexander Williams, Sr., from the Terrell family, who were cousins of Nell. In fact, various members of Nell's family owned the home throughout the twentieth-



Figure 29. Exterior masonry work on the Hildebrand House after its relocation, late 1960s. *Courtesy of Hunter Raby.*

century. John Thomas was her grandfather, the Gilberts were her aunt and uncle, and some of her other cousins owned the home throughout the years as well. In the late 1960s, the Williamses decided to relocate the historic Hildebrand House approximately 350 yards to the south to eliminate dust from the nearby road and avoid any potential for future flooding (see Figures 28-29). At this time, the historic frame home was placed on a new foundation, its exterior was covered in brick, the rear ell was reconstructed, and new chimneys were built.

In 1983, Henry and Nell passed away. To keep the home safe, Nell had left the house, its contents, and four acres of land to the Tennessee Historical Society, subject to a life estate for her daughter Patricia Williams Trew. Nell had



Figure 30. Hildebrand House, first floor, staircase, May 2022 (left) and May 2023 (right).

previously tried to give it to the Polk County Historical Society and had been in contact with Roy Lillard, but the historical society could not accept the offer. As former THS Executive Director Ann Toplovich noted, “Williams had never been a member of the Tennessee Historical Society and did not contact the THS before her death to discuss the proposed bequest.”⁵⁹ Trew passed away on May 30, 2012, and the THS received keys to the property on July 27, 2012. Upon obtaining ownership of the home, THS staff noted that “no work has been done on the house since the death of Nelle [sic] Williams, including completing interior finishes begun before 1983.” THS staff added:

[T]he brick porch and steps are crumbling and there are significant cracks in the wood columns. Someone attempted to fill the splits with an injected foam, which flowed out onto the surface of the wood, giving the appearance of mold. On the interior of the house, two of the poorly jointed floor joists have failed – perhaps due to the weight of the staircase – and there is a significant sag in the floor in the large parlor. The sag has also caused the lifting of many of the faux brick floor tiles in the central hallway. Several

windows are partly open, as either their support cables have failed and/or window locks are missing. The attic is open at the gable ends; at one end open holes pierce the walls where the windows have been removed or never installed. Duct work in the house is incomplete a[nd] the furnace has failed or been removed. Currently there is no power to the house and no water. We assume there is a well with an electric pump.⁶⁰

On November 14, 2013, the Tennessee Historical Society and Willis A. Trew (representative of the estate of Patricia W. Trew) sold the house to Patricia T. Widmann and Mary Nell Carringer.⁶¹ They owned the property for four years, before selling it to Jana Carley Bailey on November 17, 2017.⁶² Hunter and Jessica Raby, the current owners, acquired the home in February 2022 and immediately embarked on an extensive process to repair the home and restore as much of the original elements as possible, including the historic framing, most of the original floors, existing historic mantels, wainscoting, and window and door trim, while keeping the original floorplan intact. Through their efforts, the Hildebrand House, which was built for and owned by a prominent Cherokee family, will continue to stand as a symbol of a Cherokee family's prosperity and perseverance through the adversity and division of removal.



Figure 31. Looking north at the main entrance from the stairs, 2023. *Courtesy of Hunter Raby.*



Figure 32. Fireplace detail, first floor, northwest room, 2022.



Figure 33. First floor, northwest room, 2023.



Figure 34. First floor, southwest room, 2022.



Figure 36. First floor, east room, 2023.



Figure 35. First floor, southwest room, 2023.



Figure 37. Looking down from second floor, staircase detail, 2023.



Figure 38. Staircase detail, 2023.

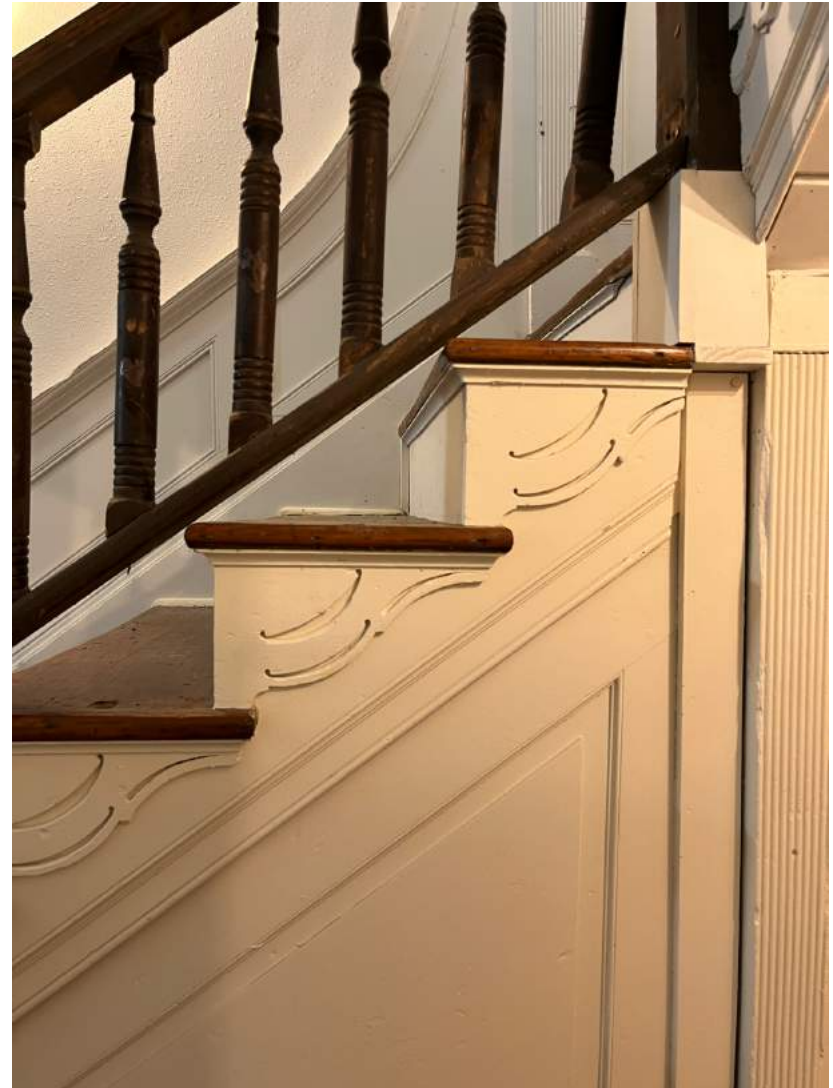


Figure 39. Staircase detail, 2023.



Figure 40. Second floor, looking north, 2023. *Courtesy of Hunter Raby.*

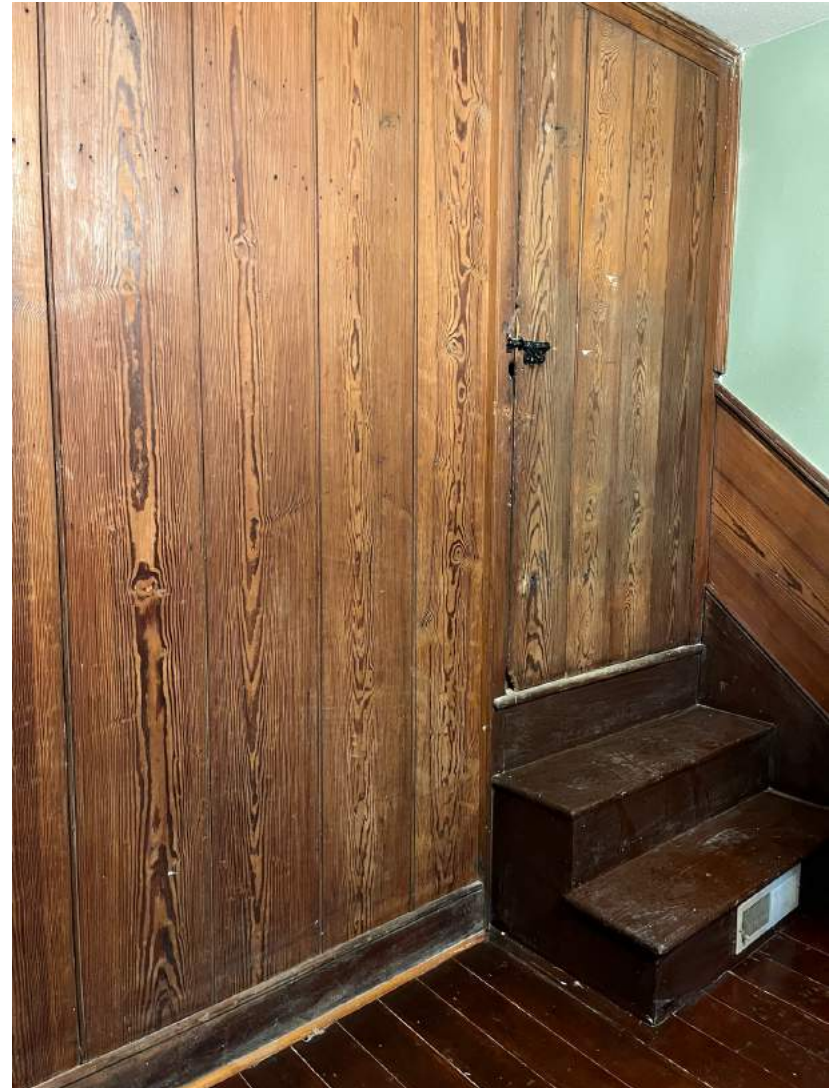


Figure 41. Second floor, southwest room, staircase to attic detail, 2023.



Figure 42. Façade, 2022.



Figure 43. Façade, 2023.



Figure 44. Façade second floor, exterior entrance detail, 2023.

ENDNOTES

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- ²⁰ David M. Wishart, "Evidence of Surplus Production in the Cherokee Nation Prior to Removal," *The Journal of Economic History* 55, no. 1 (March 1995): 129.
- ²¹ McLoughlin and Conser, Jr., 685.
- ²² *1835 Cherokee Census*; Wishart, "Evidence of Surplus Production in the Cherokee Nation Prior to Removal," Table 2, 126.
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- ²⁴ William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 327.
- ²⁵ McLoughlin and Conser Jr., 681.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Moore, ed., *1836 Cherokee Nation Property Evaluations*, 340.
- ²⁸ Sanders, "The Hildebrand House in East Tennessee," 6.
- ²⁹ "Old Fort and M'nair's," *Chattanooga News*, October 19, 1912.
- ³⁰ "Hilderbrand House is Oldest in County," *The Polk County News*, Bicentennial Edition, 1976. [HILDERBRAND CORRECT?]
- ³¹ George F. Mellen, "On the Ocoee's Banks," *Knoxville Sentinel*, October 10, 1912; Clemmer Scrapbook, Book 5, Page 103.
- ³² Ibid.
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