WHO WAS BOB WALLACE?

A Historical Inquiry

By Linda Bayer Allen

November 2014

Bob Wallace Avenue wends its way across Huntsville, Alabama, as a minor arterial street providing access to hundreds of businesses and residences and is traveled daily by thousands of people. A few of those travelers, in particular those who drive it daily, have wondered, who was Bob Wallace? Local lore holds that he was the nephew of a developer, but which developer and which nephew and when?

It all began with Edward L. Pulley, a Huntsville lawyer turned entrepreneur. Pulley, born 1870 in Huntsville, the son of Robert Lackey Pulley and his wife Georgia Strong Pulley, was the sixth of seven surviving children. His parents had farmed in the county but apparently did well enough to purchase the antebellum Isaiah Dill house on Calhoun Street in 1867. This remained the Pulley family residence until 1920 and was where Edward, or E. L. as he was often known, spent his childhood and resided as late as 1896. Robert, his father, shifted from farmer to merchant with the opening of R. L. Pulley & Son, a dry goods and notions store on South Side Square. At least two of his sons worked in the store, but E. L. had in mind a more grandiose future.

E. L.'s higher education is a little murky, but apparently he graduated from Vanderbilt University circa 1888 with a B.A. degree. When and where he completed a law degree has not been determined, but in 1891 he began a two-year term as the Huntsville city attorney. In 1894 he enlisted in the Alabama National Guard and served under William Brandon (who was appointed adjutant general of the guard in 1899). In 1895, the Alabama General Assembly authorized Pulley and two of his brothers to incorporate as the Madison Loan and Trust Company with a capital stock of $50,000. They took offices on West Side Square and placed an ad in the 1896-97 city directory naming Edward L. as president and his brother Charles H. Pulley as secretary-treasurer and announcing the firm's availability to act as assignee, trustee, receiver, agent or in any other fiduciary capacity in real estate, stocks, bonds, and general brokerage.

That was just the start: in 1898 E. L. was elected to a four-year term as state senator representing Madison County, thereby elevating himself to a position where he could hobnob with influential Alabama movers and shakers. During this period he moved out of the family residence on Calhoun and took rooms on Eustis Street for both his office and residence.

But 1908 was the year Pulley put in play the first of his truly ambitious plans. In January he, his sister Jimmie Lowry, and his brother-in-law N. O. Wallace incorporated as the South Huntsville Development Company; two weeks later Pulley purchased from the Rhett family 175 acres lying on the west side of Whitesburg Pike; and three days after that, he sold the Rhett property to the South Huntsville Development Co. for the price he had paid, $5,000. Later that year he, Jimmie Lowry, N. O. Wallace, and his brothers Dr. William J. Pulley and C. H. Pulley created a second corporation impressively titled the Huntsville, Chattanooga and Birmingham Interurban Railway Light and Power Company with the intention of constructing railways to Chattanooga and Birmingham as well as furnishing light and power along the tracks and to the cities at either end.

The first phase of the Huntsville electric street car system was already in operation, and development was booming in southwest Huntsville; the Pulleys intended to be major players in this exciting new industry. To that end the Interurban Company reached an agreement with T. C. du Pont to purchase ninety percent of the stock of the Huntsville Railway Light and Power Company for $54,500. The siblings harbored a grand vision not only of expanding the local electric car line to better serve their newly purchased property and the county fairground lying west of it, but also to construct interurban extensions connecting Huntsville with nearby metropolitan centers.

The following year, 1909, E. L. Pulley recorded the first subdivision, the Clerk and Salaried Man's Addition, in the Whitesburg acreage and sold the first lot. (The plat was so recorded, but scribes ever since have been silently altering the name; the 1929 Quigley map labels it the Clerks and Salaried Men's Addition.) Shortly after, in September 1910, the family's plans deteriorated quickly when E. L. fell sick and died at age 40 of kidney failure. He had not married and left no children. His will of 1897 bequeathed to his brother Dr. William Pulley of New York City all his property, real and personal, and nominated another brother Robert S. Pulley as executor.

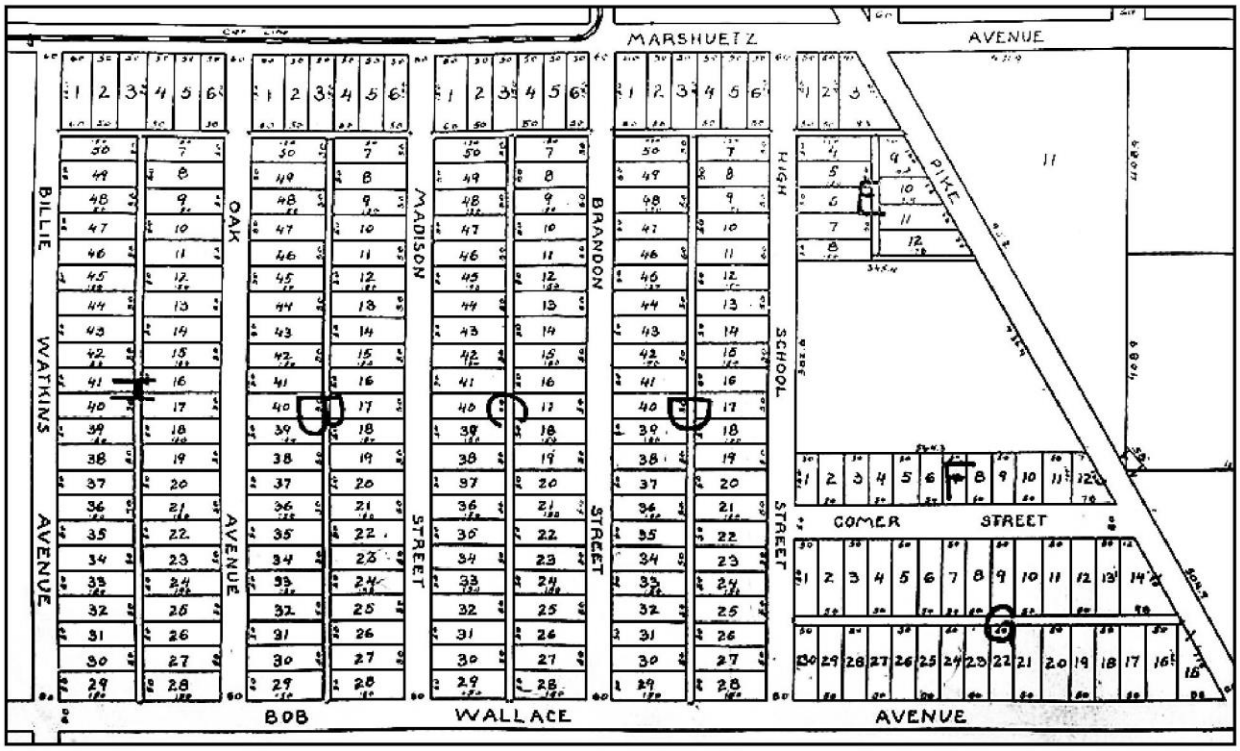
When the estate went through probate, all Pulley's grand schemes unraveled. An accounting of his assets and debts revealed that his estate was insolvent, even after his personal and real property had been sold. Thousands of dollars still owed to du Pont were in default because the Interurban Company had no funds—which ended the dream of a regional railway. (Oddly, the Clerks & Salaried Men's plat shows the "car line" running along Marshuetz; it is assumed that the line was not then in place, that it was planned, like the streets, but not yet built.) After making some 38 sales in the subdivision and quit claiming right-of-way for expansion of the local street railway, the surviving stockholders dissolved the South Huntsville Development Company in 1913. The only bright spot in all this might have been the annual Tennessee Valley Fair which closed a few days after Pulley's death. He had been secretary of the fair association, an original incorporator, and a huge supporter; the 1910 fair was considered a financial success which was largely attributed to his efforts.

In the end, all that the Pulley siblings, acting as the South Huntsville Development Company, bequeathed Huntsville was the almost empty Clerks and Salaried Men's neighborhood which began at Whitesburg Pike, extended west five blocks, and was divided into 254 lots and eight streets plus one large unnumbered lot. The newly platted streets were Comer, High School, Brandon, Madison, and Oak, with Billie Watkins as the west boundary, Marshuetz as the north boundary, and Bob Wallace as the south boundary. (The subdivision also included a block lying in the V between Whitesburg and Franklin, but this study does not include that block.)

This original 1909 five-block-long portion of Bob Wallace Avenue remained that length until 1928 when it was platted eastward to its intersection with Sunset Drive in College Hill Addition; but, Sunset Drive was never constructed so Bob Wallace ended then, as now, at Lytle Street. (Today a different Sunset Avenue runs for three blocks south off Bob Wallace.)

The west end of Bob Wallace stopped at Billie Watkins until the late-1950s when an enormous influx of residents forced massive changes in the city and, in particular, the street system. Bob Wallace Avenue was pushed westward to connect with Thirteenth Avenue and then with

Madison Pike in West Huntsville, thereby joining the two sides of the city across the south. After Sparkman Drive was constructed, Bob Wallace was connected to its southern end to create a partial ring road, but the Bob Wallace name was dropped where the road turned north. It had taken nearly half a century for Bob Wallace Avenue to reach its current configuration and status as a minor arterial street running from Lytle to Sparkman. (Farther south, Drake Avenue also was extended westward but not until the 1960s when it was connected first with Donegan Lane and later with Ridgecrest Street under the name Drake Avenue.)



Above is the 1909 subdivision, as it was platted, showing the original portion of Bob Wallace Avenue. The diagonal street labeled Pike is Whitesburg. It is presumed that Pulley dreamed of selling the large lot fronting on High School Street to the city for its first public high school, a coup that would have made the subdivision lots highly desirable. Comer Street probably was never opened, and by 1929 it had disappeared from the city map. Note the correct spelling of Marshuetz Avenue; the 1949 Sanborn map continued the original spelling while noting that the street west of Brandon was still not open. The dashed line running along the middle of Marshuetz is labeled "car line." Block A has been omitted from this illustration.

As late as 1940 the city directory shows no addresses on Bob Wallace, partially because all of the lots faced the north-south streets except those in Block G. Even the 1949 update of the Sanborn fire insurance map shows only a scattering of houses in the Clerks & Salaried Men's Addition, but the phenomenal growth of the city during the 1950s created a demand for every lot and forced the construction of a greatly expanded street network. It was not until 1958 that the city addressed the confusing tangle of street names in a city-wide ordinance that changed several of the names in the Clerks & Salaried Men's Addition. The boundary street names were retained: Marshuetz, Billie Watkins, Whitesburg, and Bob Wallace. But Oak Street became Gallatin, Madison became Poincianna, and High School became Pansy. Comer Street disappeared, and

Brandon Street extended north two blocks to Longwood. By the end of the 1950s, nearly all the lots west of Pansy Street had been filled with houses.

What was the inspiration for the original names? We can only make educated guesses, but some names seem obvious. Whitesburg, of course, already existed as did Oak and Madison streets; the logical assumption was that the already established downtown portions of Oak (now Fountain Circle) and Madison would be pushed south to connect with the new subdivision streets of the same name, but that didn't happen. High School Street was a fantasy that was dashed when the first public high school was located on West Clinton Street in 1916; ironically, the third Huntsville High School building was erected on Billie Watkins in 1954, and the fourth was recently completed on Bob Wallace Avenue. Pulley was a man ahead of his time.

Comer Street was probably named for the sitting Alabama governor, Braxton Bragg Comer, (1907-1911), and Brandon Street could have honored William W. Brandon, the state adjutant general (1899-1907) and member of the state house of representatives where he served three terms beginning in 1896. Pulley would have known both of these men through his military and political activities, and his senate term coincided with Brandon's time in the house. Although Pulley did not live to see it, Brandon went on to be elected governor in 1922. Pulley likely speculated that Comer and Bragg could prove useful to him in his future financial and real estate pursuits.

Today's Marsheutz [*sic*] Avenue is a little more problematical. Leo J. Marshuetz [*sic*] lived on Lincoln Street in the 1890s and was associated with J. Klaus & Co., a clothier on North Side Square. He also dealt in real estate, including the purchase of the first lot sold in the Clerks & Salaried Men's Addition. He paid $100 for a lot that fronted on Marshuetz [*sic*]—which prompts one to ask what was the connection between the street name and the buyer as the two names were then identical. Only later did the city misspell the street name. A cursory search reveals no Marshuetz family members among the Pulley relatives, but it is an unusual name to be a random choice. At any rate, Leo didn't stay in Huntsville but relocated to Montgomery before 1920.

That leaves Billie Watkins and Bob Wallace streets unaccounted for. The assumption made here is that Pulley selected the names Comer and Brandon, but the South Huntsville Development Company had two other partners, N. O. Wallace and Jimmie Lowry, who presumably had street name suggestions of their own. As it turns out, Nathaniel Odell Wallace had married Pulley's sister Mary Wade Pulley in 1893, and they had a son named Robert Pulley Wallace, born 1898 in Lincoln County, Tennessee. The Wallaces lived on Mulberry Avenue in Fayetteville, where N. O. was a son of the founder and editor of the local newspaper, which he and his brothers inherited from their father. From Robert Wallace's 1918 World War I draft registration, we learn that he was a pre-med student at Vanderbilt University. The 1940 federal census reveals that he was a surgeon in private practice living on East 79th Street in Manhattan, had married Jeanne Hopton in 1933, and they were the parents of a daughter Mary Louise born in 1938. Robert Pulley Wallace died in New York of heart failure in 1957—the precise period when Bob Wallace Avenue became a major thoroughfare.

Dr. Robert P. Wallace

Dr. Robert P. Wallace, a specialist in internal medicine and medical director of the Sinclair Oil Corporation, died yesterday in Doctors Hospital. His age was 59. He lived at 240 East Seventy-ninth Street and had his office at 277 Park Avenue.

A fellow of the American College of Physicians, Dr. Wallace also was a member of the Academy of Medicine, the New York Gastroenterological Society and the Bellevue Alumni. He was on the medical board of Doctors Hospital. Dr. Wallace received his medical degree from University and Bellevue Hospital Medical School in 1924.

Surviving are his widow, Jeanne, and a daughter, Miss Mary Louise Wallace.

New York Times Obituary, 10 October 1957

So, the local lore appears to be correct. Bob Wallace was a nephew of not one, but two, developers, E. L. Pulley and Jimmie Lowry, and the son of the third firm member, N. O. Wallace. Robert Wallace, or Bob as we casually refer to him, never lived in Huntsville and consequently was lost to civic memory.

But who was Billie Watkins?
That is a story for another day….