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Dr. Kenneth Johnson, Chairman
Alabama Historical Association Marker Committee

Marker Dedication - October 20, 1985

On October 20, 1985, the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society met at Ditto's Landing to dedicate the historical marker commemorating that site, as well as honoring James Ditto and Colonel James White, both of whom were instrumental in the early establishment of that area. Among those present were descendants of the two personalities who helped to shape the early history of Madison County. Those individuals representing James Ditto were Mrs. Margaret Lowe, Mrs. Mary Cooke, and Mrs. Ruth P. Petty. Descendants of Colonel White who attended were Mrs. Margaret Henson, Mrs. Jane F. Scott, Mrs. Suzie Scott Smith, and Mr. James M. White.

The ceremony began at 3:00 p.m. with an invocation given by the Rev. Henry M. Williams, pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Huntsville, Alabama. Dr. Frances C. Roberts, Emerita Professor of History at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, then introduced the first speaker, Dr. Kenneth Johnson, Professor of History at the University of North Alabama, Florence, Alabama.

Dr. Johnson, whose presentation was entitled, "Transportation Influences in Westward Expansion," spoke on the importance of Ditto's Landing. The landing was later incorporated as Whitesburg on December 23, 1824, in honor of Colonel White of Abingdon, Virginia, who "established a thriving port at this location," according to the marker. Dr. Johnson, moreover, pointed out the larger role that the Tennessee River played in the settlement of the "Old Southwest" which was vital to the economic and social well-being of the early American nation.

Among the early pioneers who helped to settle the "Old Southwest" was James Ditto, who established a ferry at the landing in 1807. William J. Stubno, local historian and Treasurer of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, gave the second presentation on this elusive historical personality. He introduced documented evidence, proving that James Ditto indeed established Ditto's Landing along the banks of the Tennessee River south of Huntsville.

Upon the conclusion of the second presentation, James Record, a former President of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and retired Chairman of the Madison County Commission, presented the marker. Dr. Johnson accepted it on behalf of the Alabama Historical Association. The marker, paid for out of funds from an anonymous donor, was then viewed by special guests and by others in attendance.

THE END

IN SEARCH OF A MAN NAMED DITTO

by William Stubno

Most people, visiting Ditto's Landing, have heard that it was named for one of the area's earliest settlers, Old Man Ditto. Yet little today is known about this early pioneer who came to the region when it was a vast wilderness.

It has been said that John Ditto (the first name, James, appears in all the records) came to the Big Spring in the fall of 1802 and constructed a lean-to pole shelter against a bluff. Soon realizing that he was close to a suitable location to carry on business with the Indians in the vicinity, he moved to the nearby Tennessee River and established a trading post.(1) Thereafter, Ditto established a ferry and a boat yard near the trading post and then faded into oblivion.(2)

This account of the story of Old Man Ditto has been handed down for generations. Yet how accurate is the historical information on this individual who is, perhaps, the earliest settler of Madison County? The answer can be found in contemporary records, whereby a preliminary investigation into them has already substantiated some of the folklore, and has added new information as well, on the life and times of James Ditto.

Records investigated so far reveal that Ditto was born before 1755.(3) His place of birth was probably somewhere in Pennsylvania or Maryland, where various members of the Ditto family first settled in America.(4) As a young boy he apparently migrated with his family from the Pennsylvania or Maryland

countryside by way of the "Great Wagon Road" through Virginia, to one of the five counties created by the North Carolina legislature-- "Johnson and Granville in 1746, Anson in 1750, Orange in 1752, and Rowan in 1753.(5) These counties were created specifically for the Irish Protestants and Germans who migrated southward in great numbers from Pennsylvania and Maryland.(6)

One of the earliest records found thus far in North Carolina concerning a Ditto family member was a Granville County deed stating that a Henry Ivy on December 19, 1758, sold 130 acres on the west "side of Mill Swamp in Ross' line" to William Ditto for 18 pounds.(7) Ditto sold the property the following day for 13 pounds and 5 shillings.(8) A William Ditto was again found in 1774 in a Chatham County, North Carolina record, specifically the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions stating that he was appointed overseer of Harmons' Road "from Loves Creek to [the] Guilford County Line."(9) Chatham County, incidentally, was formed in 1770 from Orange County which had been formed in 1752 from Bladen, Granville, and Johnston Counties.(10)

By the middle of the 18th century, the Ditto family in North Carolina was concentrated mostly in Chatham County.(11) In fact, a James Ditto was mentioned in 1782 in Deed Book C as being the neighbor of Henry Bray who had taken a William Ditto to court in 1778 over a land dispute in that county.(12) Perhaps this William Ditto, who may have been the same individual who purchased land in Granville County from Henry Ivy in 1759, was related to James Ditto.(13)

The name James Ditto again appeared in the court records in 1782. The minutes stated that he was petitioning the Governor of North Carolina "for a pardon for his lenient and benevolent treatment to prisoners when in his power," suggesting that the individual in question was loyal to the British during the Revolutionary War which had ended the previous year.(14)

In 1788, a James Ditto was found purchasing land in northwestern South Carolina near the Pacolat River, an area easily accessible by the migration roads from Chatham County, North Carolina.(15) In 1790, the first U. S. Census listed a James Ditto with a large family living in Pendleton County, South Carolina. This James Ditto in South Carolina has been identified as Old Man Ditto.(16) He was again listed for a second and final time in South Carolina in the 1800 Census.(17)

Between 1800 and 1807, James Ditto of South Carolina migrated to the "Bend of the Tennessee" and eventually established a ferry in 1807 at a place which would be called Ditto's Landing, located along the northern banks of the Tennessee River in fractional section 30, township 5 south, range 1 east of the Huntsville Meridian Line.(18) At the time that the landing was established, the tract upon which it stood was owned by the Federal Government. In 1812, LeRoy Pope entered the land and later assigned it to John Brahan who made the final installment payment prior to his receiving the patent or title to the land in 1817.(19) Brahan later sold it to Colonel James White, a wealthy merchant from Virginia.(20)

Although Ditto never held title to Ditto's Landing, he did live on 160 acres of land with his family in the southwest quarter of section 28, township 5 south, range 1 east of the Huntsville Meridian Line. For a short time, he made payments on the property, but transferred it to his son, Michael, who eventually received title to the acreage.(21)

The role played by Ditto as an Indian trader has yet to be examined. It is assumed, however, that when contemporary sources are analyzed, information on that facet of Ditto's life will come to light.

According to the records, Ditto's final years, before his death in 1828, centered around mercantile pursuits.(22) Nevertheless, he was undoubtedly an unassuming man, evidenced by the few earthly possessions he owned when he died: one bed, two books, two trunks, one oven, and one tin cannister all of which were appraised for \$5.75.(23) Yet he was rich in other respects, for he was instrumental in helping to establish an area which became vitally important to the westward expansion of the nation.

Footnotes

1

"Ditto's Landing Once Very Important as Trading Post," The Huntsville Daily Times, 3 March 1931.

2

George Wartz, statement made to Kathleen Paul Jones by George Swartz, 26 April 1930, copy located in the files of the author.

3

William C. Stewart, ed., 1800 Census of Pendleton District, South Carolina (Washington, D.C.: National Genealogical Society, 1963), p. 37.

4

Early American court and census records revealed that individuals with the surname, Ditto, lived in southeastern Pennsylvania and adjacent Maryland.

5

Hugh Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome, The History of a Southern State: North Carolina 3rd. edition (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973), p. 84.

6

Ibid., pp. 81 and 84.

7

Zae Hargett Gwynn, ed., Abstracts of the Early Deeds of Granville County, North Carolina, 1746 - 1765 (Rocky Mount, North Carolina: Joseph W. Watson, 1974), p. 108.

8

Ibid.

9

Marilyn Poe Laird and Vivian Poe Jackson, eds., Chatham County, North Carolina Court Minutes, 1774-1779 Vol. I (Dolton, Illinois: Poe Publishers, n.d.), p. 3.

10

Charles Christopher Chriddenden and Dan Lacy, eds., The Historical Records of North Carolina, Vol. I (Raleigh, North Carolina: The North Carolina Historical Commission, 1948), p. 319; Charles Christopher Chriddenden and Dan Lacy, eds., The Historical Records of North Carolina, Vol. III (Raleigh, North Carolina: The North Carolina Historical Commission, 1939), p. 82.

11

North Carolina records place the Ditto family mostly in Chatham County, North Carolina, in the latter 18th century. Author's note.

12

Laird and Jackson, eds., Chatham County Court Minutes, p. 69.

13

Gwynn, ed., Abstracts of Granville County Deeds, p. 108.

14

Marilyn Poe Laird and Vivian Poe Jackson, eds., Chatham County, North Carolina Court Minutes, 1781 - 1785 Vol. II (Dolton, Illinois: Poe Publishers, n.d.), p. 14.

15

Records of the Commissioner of Mesne Conveyence, Book D, p. 48, Greenville County Courthouse, Greenville, South Carolina.

16

Genealogical information compiled by Margaret Lowe, a descendant of James Ditto, revealed that James Ditto of Pendleton County/District, South Carolina was the same individual who established Ditto's Landing. Author's note: Department of Commerce and Labor, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: South Carolina (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908; reprint ed., Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1964), p. 81.

17

Stewart, 1800 Census of South Carolina, p. 37.

18

Letter from James Ditto to Andrew Jackson, November 1813, Andrew Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

19

Credit Prior Final Receipts and Credit Prior Final Certificate, File 667, Huntsville, Alabama, John Brahan, assignee of LeRoy Pope, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, Record Group 49, National Archives, Washington, D.C.: Land Patent, U.S. to John Brahan, File 667, Vol. 108, p. 861, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Eastern States Office, Alexandria, Virginia.

20

Deed Book K, pp. 182-183, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

21

Credit Prior Final Receipts and Credit Prior Final Certificate, File 249, Huntsville, Alabama, Michael Ditto, assignee of Alexander Hunter, John C. Hamilton, Thomas Roland, and James Ditto, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, Record Group 49, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Circuit Court in Chancery, Book F, pp. 267-269, Department of Old Records, Madison County Law Library Building, Huntsville, Alabama; Tax Rolls, Madison County, Mississippi Territory, Records of the Territorial Auditor, Record Group 3, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

22

The records of Madison County, Alabama, contain numerous cases concerning Ditto's financial dealings up to the year of his death in 1828.

23

Probate Record Book 2 and 5, p. 136, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

WHY TWICKENHAM?

A Speculation on the Vision of the Founders

by Eleanor Newman Hutchens

This is a purely speculative essay, an attempt to guess why the founders of Huntsville named it Twickenham. The tradition is, of course, that their leader, Leroy Pope, wanted it named in honor of the great English poet whose surname he shared. Chroniclers of Huntsville used to say that Leroy Pope was a direct descendant of the poet, but the word eventually got around that Alexander Pope never married and is not known to have sired any progeny. The story was then modified to read that Leroy Pope was simply an admirer of his poetry. This may have been true; but it seems to me unlikely that the strong-minded group of families who planned this town would have chosen its name on the whim of one of their number, acknowledged leader though he was. I think it more probable that they wanted it to be like the original Twickenham--a place noted for its cordial society, handsome houses, beautiful gardens, and famous residents.

There is another possibility. The Virginians who founded what is now Huntsville had previously founded and lived in Petersburg, Georgia, which they had named for the Petersburg of their native state. Petersburg, Virginia, was the sister city of Richmond, the two having been founded on the James and Appomattox Rivers by William Byrd. Now, Richmond on the Thames River, in England, could be regarded as the sister of Twickenham, which lies very near it on the opposite bank. Our founders may have enjoyed the idea of naming two towns for sister

cities of towns called Richmond; but again, so serious a matter as naming the place where they expected to live out their lives probably would not have been decided on such a fanciful notion as this. Surely they had a vision of what they wanted their town in this beautiful valley to be; and Twickenham, which they could have known through the work of Pope and its other eminent people, may have provided them with an ideal.

If Twickenham in England had had a Twickenham Historic Preservation Society at about the time John Hunt was building his cabin beside the Big Spring, we might be able to see it today almost as it was in the time of Alexander Pope, who lived there from 1719 until his death in 1744. It does have a Local History Society now, however, and thanks to the generosity of that group I have obtained a booklet called "Twickenham 1600-1900: People and Places" which is a concise history of the houses, gardens, and residents of that remarkable spot. Another valuable source of information, especially on the spirit of the place, is The Garden and the City, by the American scholar Maynard Mack, a specialist in Pope and the Eighteenth Century in England. Finally, I have taken pleasure in using an 1808 volume of Pope's letters which I found in our family library. The set belonged to John H. Coleman, who must have been one of the Colemans who later became related to us, and subsequently to Charles Coleman Thach, whose family's land adjoined that of Thomas Bibb in Limestone County and who became president of Auburn. These letters, more than any other source, show Pope's delight in Twickenham and the development of his estate there. The date of the 1808 American edition, only one year before our founders chose Twickenham as the

name of their town, is tenuous as evidence but pleasingly suggestive.

It is dismal to note that 1808 was also the year Alexander Pope's house was torn down, by a later owner who became exasperated by public interest in the dead poet's residence.

In order to understand Pope's Twickenham, one must see it as the embodiment of several 18th-century ideals. One of these was adopted from the Roman poet Horace, who celebrated the joys of the rural retreat, safe from urban intrusion and corruption but enlivened by visits from good friends to share conversation and wine. Another was the fashion for Palladian architecture, and a third was an intense interest in landscaping and gardening. Alexander Pope shared and indeed did much to combine and advance these elements of the good life in the thinking of his time--and he did it mainly in Twickenham.

Twickenham began as a private park, enclosed in the 13th century by the brother of King Henry III. Three and a half centuries later, Francis Bacon lived there and is thought to have played host to Queen Elizabeth at dinner. In 1609 the Countess of Bedford, close friend of the family of James I, built a fine house where the poet John Donne visited her. One of his poems is called "Twicknam Garden." This house was demolished in 1805.

As estates from the original park were sold, Twickenham became a fashionable place to live. At Cambridge House, Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Edward Gibbon, Joshua Reynolds, David Garrick, the Earl of Chesterfield and other 18th-century

celebrities gathered for conversation. The 300-year history of this house ended with demolition in the 1930's. The learning, creative talent, and social polish epitomized in the men and women who used to meet under its roof were the very best of their age, and those names were bywords still among cultivated Virginians after the American Revolution and well into the 19th century.

Another fine house of Pope's time, a gem of a Palladian villa which by a narrow escape has survived to the present and is open to the public, is Marble Hill. Here the Countess of Suffolk entertained a circle of friends sometimes called "the Twickenham Club," including Pope, Jonathan Swift, Dr. Arbuthnot, and John Gay, author of The Beggar's Opera. Marble Hill was bought in the late 19th century by the Cunard family and plans were made to demolish it and use the grounds for a housing development, but a frantic effort pulled together enough public and private money for a rescue. It was opened as a public park, and in the 1960's the house was restored by the Greater London Council.

For us, I think the most interesting house of Pope's Twickenham would be his own, if only it had survived. When he leased the property in 1718, it consisted of a small house facing the river with about five acres behind it on the other side of a road. These acres he decided to make into a garden; and in order to reach his garden without crossing the road, he constructed a tunnel, which he decorated elaborately as a grotto and which is still there, stripped of most of its decorations. A few years ago I managed to go through it, kindly conducted by a nun of the convent that now occupies the property. The

entrance faced the river and the tunnel ran under Pope's house and under the road behind it to his garden. Friends who came by boat to his front lawn could look through the grotto and see a charming little shell temple framed by the end of the passage. From the garden, Pope could see the river and passing boats as through a telescope. He could even sit and write in the grotto, which contained several recesses and was furnished with a lamp, and one of its treasures for him was a spring of clear water that played with soothing music on his usually frazzled nerves.

The fine architect James Gibbs enlarged and redesigned Pope's small house to make a restrained and elegant Palladian villa of three stories in its central block and two at the sides. Pope later added a portico. The house in Huntsville that most resembles Pope's is the Leroy Pope Walker house as viewed from the western foot of McClung and Echols at their intersection with Williams Street. Pope had a sloping front lawn, as does the Walker house, though not narrowing to a point but continuing in its full width to the river. His house contained many portraits of his friends, some of them painted by his Twickenham neighbor Sir Godfrey Kneller. (It is gratifying to note that the Huntsville Museum of Art now possesses one of Kneller's portraits.) Among the busts of great poets and artists were one of Palladio, the Italian Renaissance architect, and one of Inigo Jones, the English architect who did most to inspire the Palladian revival a century before Pope's time.

By the time he came to plan his own garden, Pope had been interested for years in landscaping and had advised some of his

richer friends in the planning of theirs. We tend to think of Pope as the greatest exponent of 18th-century formality, symmetry, and artificiality. Nevertheless, his idea of designing a garden was to achieve above all a natural effect. There is no paradox here. As in the easily quotable lines of his poetry, much intricate art went into the apparently natural. He surrounded his five acres with thick trees and unclipped hedges, among which he made a few winding paths. Within this border he made mounds, one of them high and rocky. At the edges of the open area he had a vineyard, a kitchen garden, and utility shelters. In the large central space were clumps of trees, some statuary, a bowling green, and other walkways, all disposed so that the stroller enjoyed the sense of being in an untouched natural place but occasionally coming upon a pleasing contrast in the form of art.

This garden was internationally famous. Poems were written about it in various languages, people came to see it until a later owner spoiled it, and along with the house and grotto it became a part of the legend of Pope.

Perhaps mainly because of Pope, but undoubtedly also because of its other famous residents and their classically-inspired houses and gardens, Twickenham itself became famous as a place where an ideal of the good life had been realized. It was a rural retreat conveniently near London, it had been made beautiful, and its inhabitants were among the most interesting people alive--members of the nobility, writers, painters, witty actresses, very successful merchants, and what the 18th century called virtuosos, gifted amateurs who had made themselves

experts and sometimes expert practitioners in the arts or sciences. It was a retreat not from human society but to the very best company. It was exactly the sort of place I imagine a groups of cultivated Virginians would have liked to create for themselves. When they laid out the town of Twickenham above the Big Spring with its wild natural cliff and began to build their tasteful Palladian-derived Federal houses and plant their elaborate gardens and promptly enter upon a cultural life in which books, music, art, and practical innovation would take a lively part, they may well have been looking toward that English model.

I know little about early Huntsville gardens except that they existed. Anne Royall, in the often-quoted account of her visits here in 1817 and 1822, was primarily interested in the wealth, hospitality, and social and cultural life of the town. She mentions one house that must have been as rich in paintings and sculptures as Alexander Pope's or most of his neighbors'. But there is a description of a Huntsville garden in the early 1850's that suggests Pope's. It was that of Robert Fearn, who lived at what is now 210 Williams Avenue. John Wyeth describes it in his autobiography, With Sabre and Scalpel, as it was when as a boy from the country he visited it with his mother. Here is his account.

"I shall never forget those Huntsville gardens and the beautiful flowers. ...here the grounds were very large and this garden was laid out like a big Chinese puzzle. There were tiny paths that led in all directions, with dense rows of box along the

edges, and the beds were grouped in all sorts of fantastic shapes, and down at one end stood a small house all of glass windows where they put things away in cold weather to keep the frost from killing them. Farther away was the vegetable garden, for there were no market-houses in those early days, and every home provided for itself; and back of this, opening on an alleyway which cut the block in two, were the spacious stables for the milk-cows, horses and carriages."

This is, of course, an 18th-century English garden, perhaps showing more obvious artifice than Pope's but typical of others in his Twickenham. And it must have dated back to early Huntsville; boxwood grows slowly. My point is that early Huntsville gave much thought and care to landscaping and gardening as supports to the same values that formed 18th-century Twickenham.

Both the English Twickenham and Huntsville happen to be indebted to visiting women journalists for descriptions of the places as they once were. Here is Henrietta Pye, writing of Twickenham a few years after the death of Alexander Pope:

"The whole place is one continued garden. Plenty and Pleasure are the Ideas convey'd by its large fields of Corn and its verdant Meadows. . . . The Genius of the Inhabitants inclines not toward Commerce, Architecture seems their chief Delight, in which if any one doubts their excelling,

let him sail up the River and view their lovely villas beautifying its Banks; Lovers of true Society, they despise Ceremony, and no Place can boast more Examples of domestic Happiness."

Anne Royall says of the buildings in Huntsville, "The workmanship is the best I have seen in all the states"; and of its people, "The citizens are gay, polite, and hospitable, and live in great splendor.... They visit each other without ceremony, morning, noon, and night, and are invited to await breakfast, dinner, and supper; but no such thing as that bane of society, a 'Tea Party.'"

Now, as we all know, the founders of our Twickenham came here rich to make themselves richer. They bought large tracts of land, cleared them, and planted cotton. Some of them were merchants or professional men as well. Their primary energies went into the building of their fortunes. But they had as their end the creation of a certain kind of life. They built their houses not mainly on their plantations but here close together, to make a town. And they named that town Twickenham.

The story that the name was chosen because their leader was named Pope goes far back. Anne Royall is the earliest source I know, and she was here less than a decade after the naming. According to her, "Colonel Pope, it is said, tried hard to have the name changed, to Twickenham, after the residence of his namesake (and from whom it is said he is descended) in England. But places, somehow or other, will retain their first names." Her sources were wrong on two

points: the name Twickenham actually was adopted officially, and Leroy Pope was not descended from the poet. However, the story persists. Virginia Clay-Clopton, whose father-in-law Clement Comer Clay was certainly in a position to know, says, "The friends of Colonel Pope...named the town in honor of the birthplace of the immortal poet." Another slight error: the poet was not born at Twickenham. But she goes on: "For two years, until the original name was restored by a second act of Legislature, the little city was known as 'Twickingham [sic] Town,' and to many of its old families this name remains so dear that among themselves it still continues to be affectionately applied." She wrote this after 1900. This authoritative report tells us one important thing: that the name Twickenham meant much more to our founders than it could possibly have meant as a play upon the name of their leader or even a sign of reverence for a great poet. It must have had a cluster of associations, a grouping of social and aesthetic values that they hoped would define their town.

Leroy Pope may have been the first to think of Twickenham; his brilliant son-in-law John Williams Walker, a witty graduate of Princeton and quoter of Pope (including Pope's letters) may have hit upon it; even Thomas Bibb, whose sister was married to an Alexander Pope, may have proposed it. These three men rode on horseback together through much of the Mississippi Territory in 1808, soon deciding to move their families here and build, as John Wyeth says, "a new Virginia"--which meant, in those days, a bit of 18th-century English manor life. As they formed the ideal town in their minds on that long ride, the English Twickenham, as soon as one

of them thought of it, may have seemed the perfect model.

The founders of many American towns chose grandly ambitious names from Europe--Athens, Rome, Vienna, Paris. In contrast, the choice of "Twickenham" was sophisticated. It revealed a special knowledge of a certain small English community; and it announced specific and qualitative aims for a small American community. These are evidenced by the quick founding of a library, excellent male and female academies, a Haydn Society, a Thespian Society and a theater, and the attention to architecture and landscaping that the name promised.

Why was that name abandoned, and why so soon? One tradition says that simple justice to John Hunt prevailed, another that the older name could not be overcome, and a third that anti-British feeling in the events leading to the War of 1812 made the salute to England unpopular. A combination of these reasons is likely. At any rate, by the time he wrote his history of Madison County in the 1880's Judge Thomas Taylor could speak of "how we escaped the awful fate of being known to the world as Twickenham."

As Virginia Clay-Clopton has testified, opinion was not unanimous on this point. There have continued to be, and happily still are, Huntsvillians determined to keep the name alive, most notably now in that of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District. If their resolve needs any strengthening, the speculations in which I have indulged, nebulous though they have been, may possibly serve some purpose in drawing attention to the merits and attractions of the original Twickenham.

NORTH ALABAMA COLLEGE
1858 - 1864

The Non-Existent School

by Mrs. Earle R. Ford

On April 5, 1858, the Moderator of the North Alabama Prebytery called a meeting of this body in the city of Knoxville, Tennessee, for the purpose of electing a board of trustees for the North Alabama College, a school for boys which had been in the planning of the Huntsville Presbyterian Church since 1852.(1)

The trustees elected at this time were: the Rev. Mr. F. A. Ross, minister of the Huntsville Church, Mr. L. B. Sheffey, and Mr. Isaiah Dill. The Rev. Mr. Ross was to serve on the board until the spring of 1859, Mr. Sheffey's term of office expired in the spring of 1860 and Mr. Dill's in 1861.

The school was incorporated under the laws of the state of Alabama on May 14, 1858.(2) In July of that year, the church purchased 140 acres of land in the southeast section of Huntsville from George Horton for the sum of \$7,000.(3) This property included what became known as the College Hill Addition.

Matthew W. Steele, son of architect George Steele received the contract to build a three story brick school which was begun in the early part of 1859. The building was approximately 125 feet in length by 65 feet in width. It faced what is now Governors Drive and extended for about twenty feet into the west side of Bassett Street. (4)



This picture is taken from a sketch made by a member of Gen. O.M. Mitchell's army while the Federal troops were encamped in Huntsville. The sketch accompanied an article which appeared in the August 4, 1862, issue of Harper's Weekly. The school was demolished in 1864 on orders of Brig. Gen. D. H. Stanley, and the brick was used to build chimneys for tents of the soldiers.

Construction was discontinued in April of 1862 when Huntsville was occupied by Federal troops under the command of General O.M. Mitchell. By this time the exterior had been completed, the tin roof was in place protecting the partially completed interior, and all of the materials for finishing the school were stored within the building.

During the winter of 1863-1864, the weather was extremely cold; in fact it was one of the most severe winters ever experienced in Huntsville. Brigadier General D. H. Stanley, who was in charge of the Federal troops at this time, ordered that the North Alabama College be demolished. His testimony, contained in a letter of December 1, 1891, pointed out that the "weather was inclement," in 1864 and for this reason the brick was needed to build chimneys "for tents for the use and comfort of the United States Army."

On November 3, 1891, a meeting was held at the Presbyterian Church to "solicit the facts bearing upon the destruction of the North Alabama College by the Federal Army Corps while stationed in Huntsville."(5)

Sometime during 1893, the trustees filed a claim against the United States government for the sum of \$23,000, the estimated value placed upon the school building by Matthew W. Steele. Serving as trustees at this time were: Sidney J. Mayhew, John M. Bright, Robert Fearn, and John H. Zivley.

A bill to investigate this claim was introduced by General Joe Wheeler before the first session of the 53d Congress on September 12, 1893. From time to time between 1893 and December 3, 1901, when it

was again introduced by Congressman William Richardson to the first session of the 57th Congress, this bill was brought to the attention of the Congressmen. At this time it was referred to the committee on War Claims.

Testimony of different witnesses brought out the facts that the money for the building of the school was raised by contributions from the citizens of Huntsville, that the trustees were a non-partisan corporation and had nothing to do with "Politics, political discussions, or affiliations."

Agustus Pryor, who was 75 years old when his testimony was taken in 1906, said he saw the building being torn down in 1864, and that after the Federal troops left Huntsville, he saw at least a thousand chimneys left standing at the place of encampment, about a quarter of a mile from the location of the school building.

Alexander E. Mastin testified that as far as he knew, the church had received no compensation for the brick or any of the materials used in building the school. The truth of this statement is borne out by the fact that on August 25, 1866, the property with all buildings and materials on it was sold at public auction to James J. Donegan. This was done to satisfy a mortgage of \$3,300.(6)

On February 25, 1907, the Court of Claims found in favor of the church for \$7,600. The net amount the church received was \$5,320. The trustees of the North Alabama College at the time the settlement was made were: Sidney J. Mayhew, Alexander E. Mastin, A. S. Fletcher, Willard I. Wellman,

Malcom R. Murray, Henry B. Chase, and Paul Speake.

These funds went into the treasury of the First Presbyterian Church and no further plans were made to rebuild the school.

THE END

(Source of information other than those designated is a microfilm record of the Court of Claims in the case of the North Alabama College vs. The United States Government. This record is filed in the National Archives, Washington, D.C. under Congressional Case #12408.)

1

Record Book, First Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama.

2

Deed Book BB, p. 444, Madison County Court House, Huntsville, Alabama.

3

Deed Book BB, p. 484, Madison County Court House, Huntsville, Alabama.

4

Spot Survey of Lots 2 and 3, Block C, College Hill Addition, Office of Ralph H. Ford, Attorney, Huntsville, Alabama.

5

Record Book, First Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama.

6

Deed Book FF, p. 136, Madison County Court House, Huntsville, Alabama.



Tracy Wilder Pratt
(1861-1928)

TRACY PRATT

by Patricia H. Ryan

If readers of this article were asked the question, "Which individuals do you believe were largely responsible for shaping Huntsville's course in the nineteenth century?" one suspects most answers would include LeRoy Pope, Thomas Fearn, Clement Clay, and other early leaders. This impression is derived from the amount of written material devoted to the city's antebellum years and the dearth of research on the latter part of the century. Moreover, if the question were redirected to include only the postbellum decades, the answers become somewhat complex owing to the influx of northern capitalists who helped to mold Huntsville into an important textile center by the early 1900's. In this light the individuals then cited might arguably include James and Michael O'Shaughnessy, William Wells, and Willard Wellman. But perhaps no individual exemplifies the progressive spirit of this era as does Tracy Pratt.

Historians have long detailed "the colonial economy of the Old South," dependent as it was on northern textile mills to spin its raw cotton into cloth. To remedy this situation and to emerge from the mire of Reconstruction, Southerners in the 1880's

1

This article was condensed from a longer treatment of Tracy Pratt's life contained in Northern Dollars for Huntsville Spindles, Huntsville Planning Department, Huntsville, Alabama. and presented to the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society.

began to rally around the cry "bring the cotton mills to the cotton fields." From the period 1880 to 1910 the South attracted 10.7 million spindles; during the same period Alabama acquired 900,000 spindles and 15,000 looms. But to emulate the Yankee entrepreneur and industrialize the agrarian South entailed seeking money from outside the region, and Huntsville gratefully, however unwittingly, relied on the direction of two brothers from the North and three South Dakotans.

Michael J. O'Shaughnessy founded the Huntsville Cotton Oil Mills in 1881, and because of his enthusiastic support of the town, his brother James was attracted to the untapped potential of the region. In 1886 the brothers, along with eighteen prominent local citizens and two Memphis investors, organized the North Alabama Improvement Company to improve and develop the material resources of the area. Among the group's projects were the construction of the Monte Sano Hotel, modernization of the Huntsville Hotel, and, above all, securing the Dallas Mills for Huntsville. In 1892, for unknown reasons, the North Alabama Improvement Company in essence dissolved and sold their properties to the Northwestern Land Association, a South Dakota corporation. While some of the incorporators were Huntsvillians, three were not, and in the early 1890's these three made Huntsville their permanent home.

William S. Wells, a self-styled town builder from Pierre, South Dakota, died in 1900, thereby limiting his local contributions; nevertheless he was quite active during his residency and served as president of the Northwestern company. His obituary maintained that "by trade he was a druggist--

by adoption he was a banker, real estate agent, promoter, contractor, builder, stock raiser, and liveryman."

W. I. Wellman (1852-1922) served as president of the Farmers' & Merchants' Bank, chaired the state Republican Party, owned the Spring City Furniture Company in West Huntsville, and actively developed new subdivisions through the real estate firm of Boyd and Wellman. Apparently while still living in Pierre he linked up with Tracy Pratt.

Pratt was born in 1861 in Minnesota; his father was a bank clerk. Little is known of his early life or his business activities before his move to Huntsville; however, records from the University of Minnesota reveal he pursued a scientific course of study from 1878 to 1880 but apparently did not graduate. The cover of the 1890-91 Pierre City Directory cites Pratt and Wellman as proprietors of the Dakota Central Bank and sole owners of four additions to the City of Pierre. Another listing tells of the Pratt and Wellman Real Estate and Insurance Agency. By January of 1892 Wells, Wellman, and Pratt had decided to move to Huntsville. Two occurrences most likely prompted the translocation.

According to the Pratt family tradition, Pratt went to New York City to sell South Dakota school bonds and there met James O'Shaughnessy. O'Shaughnessy convinced Pratt of the economic opportunities Huntsville offered and described the improvement company's attempts to develop the town. An impressed Pratt returned to Pierre to then persuade his friends and associates.

Another theory is derived from a Chattanooga newspaper article which told of Wells' desire to invest in the region. Twice during 1891, in February and December, Wells visited Huntsville and on both occasions met with James O'Shaughnessy. Either or both of these explanations may account for the South Dakotans' decision to move southward.

A few months after Pratt's arrival in Huntsville, he announced the formation of a new cotton mill for the town known as the West Huntsville Cotton Mills but often called the Coons and Pratt Mills. The building was constructed at the corner of 9th Avenue and 8th Street. Aside from the mill structure itself, Pratt and Coons provided housing and stores for the operatives as was customary.

Pratt was a tireless traveler throughout the country on Huntsville's behalf, attempting to secure new industries for his adopted home. His efforts were richly rewarded. Early in 1899 the Merrimack Manufacturing Company (today Huntsville Manufacturing Company) announced plans to erect a mill with 200,000 spindles in West Huntsville. The local newspapers joyously credited its location to Tracy Pratt, who, aided by Wells, worked with Merrimack officials for eighteen months.

Once the Merrimack Company decided to build in Huntsville, a need arose for a streetcar system to link the Dallas and West Huntsville villages with Huntsville proper. Thus in July of 1899 the Huntsville Railway, Light & Power Company was organized. The capital stock was set at \$100,000; of this amount Pratt invested \$99,700. The effect of the system was quite far-reaching as it effectively opened up huge tracts of land for

residential development. The streetcar system made it practical for employees and shoppers to live beyond walking distance of the commercial section and, in fact, created the suburb as we know it today. Accordingly new industries were more easily attracted to the benefits of Huntsville.

In 1900 Pratt was successful in securing Huntsville's fifth cotton mill, Lowe (later to become the Genesco plant and now part of Martin Industries) which located at 9th Avenue and Seminole Drive. For three years Pratt had negotiated with Arthur H. Lowe of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, to reach a final settlement. Later in the same year another plant, the Rowe Knitting Company, was secured for the city and again the credit went to Pratt. The plant manufactured cotton and woolen yarns, fabrics, and was located in West Huntsville on 9th Avenue and 10th Street. Much of Rowe's capital was supplied by New Yorkers.

The expansion of the textile industry, whether securing new mills or overseeing his own, was not Pratt's only interest. He generously donated much of his time and money to benevolent causes. One far-reaching society was the Heralds of Liberty organized in 1900 by Pratt, Wellman, and James R. Boyd. Aside from encouraging a general improvement in the moral character of its members, the enterprise was chartered as a life insurance company. A few years after its inception the main headquarters moved from Huntsville to Philadelphia, probably due to rapid growth. In 1925 the Heralds of Liberty became Liberty Life Assurance Society of Birmingham and today is known as the Liberty National Life Insurance Company.

Pratt's farsightedness is illustrated by two other diverse projects he undertook in the early years of this century. In May of 1905 talk of a Huntsville-Nashville railroad arose and Pratt was named chairman of the subscription committee. For the next three years he worked tirelessly on this project. Its importance was derived from the fact that there was no direct rail line running between the two cities. A direct line would open up the cities of the Northeast and Northwest for more convenient, more rapid, and cheaper transportation. In July of 1908 Pratt broke ground for the new railroad, but for unknown reasons, the road was never constructed. However, Pratt's other major endeavor of the period was successful.

Around 1905 the drilling of oil wells had begun in the vicinity of Hazel Green, but instead of oil, the wells struck natural gas. Pratt became interested, although it is not known whether he was acting alone or in conjunction with the New York-Alabama Oil Company (sometimes called the New York-Alabama Gas Company), a Delaware corporation in which he was active. An expert was brought in who advised the company to drill near the West Huntsville Cotton Mills, where gas was indeed discovered. By 1907 the corporation sought a franchise to furnish the City of Huntsville and its environs with natural gas.

The most attractive advantage of natural gas was its cost, which would result in savings on heating, lighting, and cooking. For example, a storekeeper in West Huntsville claimed he lit his store and house for a nickel per day. Cheap power was thus accessible to the common man as well as vaunted to the industrialist as an inducement for settling in this area.

It appears that the New York-Alabama Oil Company began searching about 1902 for oil and only later became interested in natural gas. In Madison County alone, the company negotiated about 185 leases (some for tracts of several hundred acres) which were broadly worded to allow the company to secure oil, gas, coal, or mineral rights. While this seemingly indicated financial stability, in 1914 the company merged with the Huntsville Gas, Light & Fuel Company to form the Huntsville Consolidated Gas Company. The reasons given to the New York-Alabama shareholders were a lack of capital and insufficient stock sales to continue operations.

Although Pratt was actively involved in 1907 with the proposed Huntsville-Nashville Railroad and the New York-Alabama Oil Company, those were not his only business dealings. In mid-1907 he was granted the franchise to erect and operate an electric railway and power plant for Bridgeport, Alabama. The railroad was to connect Bridgeport with Copenhagen, South Pittsburg, Jasper, Huntsville, Scottsboro and Stevenson. The fate of this project is unknown.

In the following years Pratt continued his business affiliations and frequently traveled throughout the country to develop new opportunities for Huntsville, but it was 1914 before he engaged in another ambitious local project. It was in this year that the Allentown Power Company was incorporated in Florence, Alabama, with Pratt serving as president. The principal functions of the group were to construct hydroelectric dams on Cypress Creek near Florence and subdivide the adjacent property for summer homes. In addition, the company's charter provided for

the marketing of timber and minerals. The corporation existed only two months before consolidating with the Lauderdale Power Company which had been created to develop hydroelectric power along Shoals Creek. Since the two companies had been chartered for similar objectives, the merger seems logical. It is unknown what the company actually developed, but similar proposals to construct dams faced either congressional or presidential opposition.

In 1916, however, the federal government finally appropriated \$20,000,000 for construction of a nitrate plant and dam for the Shoals area. Both projects had dual purposes; nitrates were used in munitions during wartime and in fertilizers during peacetime while Wilson Dam would facilitate navigation as well as produce electricity to run the nitrate plant. The boost these projects provided North Alabama is incalculable, and one of the leading advocates of this government undertaking was Pratt.

If Tracy Pratt were remembered only for bringing several cotton mills, the streetcar system, and natural gas to Huntsville, his role as a civic leader in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be preeminent. But of the corporation records for Madison County alone, Pratt's name appears as a subscriber to almost thirty organizations, although sometimes he owned only a single share. The scope of his investments was considerable, ranging from the Alabama Amusement Company, which operated motion picture theatres, to the Perfect Products Company, which manufactured oxalic acid. His name also appears as a charter member of benevolent societies, such as the Huntsville Christian Settlement Association, and civic groups, such as the

Tennessee Valley Fair Association and the Huntsville Golf and Country Club.

Pratt's local contributions reveal his diverse interests, but his business activities also extended to the state and national levels. A complete record of Pratt's investments may never be known because corporation records usually are filed with the county and state in which the business operates. Thus Pratt's participation in non-Alabama corporations could only be ascertained by checking with every probate judge and secretary of state in the country. Nevertheless some of his more ambitious ventures have come to light. His first was in 1900 with the formation of Buck & Pratt, a cotton commission business with offices in New York City. In the early twentieth century Pratt traveled to New York numerous times on personal business and also to promote Huntsville, and he soon became associated with the Southern Textile Company which was incorporated in 1903 with a capital stock of \$14,000,000. Apparently the nature of the organization was to acquire southern textile mills and sell their goods through one commission house, possibly the firm of Buck & Pratt. The actual business of this enterprise is difficult to assess due to contradictions in local newspaper accounts; however, according to the New York Times, the corporation went bankrupt and was voided in New York for non-payment of taxes in 1907. This was not Pratt's only venture for 1903. That year he and Samuel Buck formed the Buck Coal & Coke Company with offices in South McAlester, Oklahoma (then in Indian Territory).

Probably due to his associations as director, vice-president and treasurer of the Southern Textile Company, Pratt moved to

New York City in April of 1904. Later in the year he contracted to purchase the Marlborough Hotel at Broadway and 36th Street. Perhaps the failure of the textile trust induced him to return to Huntsville, for by mid-1905 he was again living in the city.

Pratt's personal life also was filled with dramatic changes as he was married three times. In the early 1880's he married Jessie Ludlow (1866-1894) and they had three children: Albert (1884-c.1940), Lucille (1887-1894), and Leola (1890-c.1945). The oldest daughter Lucille lived in Huntsville only two years before her death at the family home on the bluff of Monte Sano, and a fortnight later the first Mrs. Pratt also died. Albert went to the Gold Rush in Alaska and disappeared; Leola married architect Thomas Carl Coleman. Pratt's second wife, Bertha Hughes Pratt whom he had married in 1903, died in 1923, and the following year Pratt wed Neide Humphrey of Huntsville. Before her marriage Miss Humphrey had received acclaim as an operatic singer, having debuted at Rome, Italy, and traveled throughout Europe and the United States. Their daughter Bess married John H. Wallace III and still resides in Huntsville.

Tracy Wilder Pratt died on October 29, 1928. His obituaries clearly elucidate his local influence:

It is generally agreed that he was responsible for more of the major industries locating in Huntsville than any other man who ever resided here, and he was often called 'Huntsville's First Citizen.'

He was a member of and identified with practically every civic, social, fraternal, patriotic, and business organization in Huntsville.

Out of respect for Pratt, all businesses in Huntsville ceased operations for five minutes at the onset of his funeral.

The most interesting Tracy Pratt story comes from a July 4, 1915, parade and celebration. Pratt had organized the events and was much surprised when local businessmen presented him with a loving cup inscribed: "As a loving testimonial of our exalted esteem, this cup is presented by the Citizens of Huntsville to Tracy W. Pratt, whose energy, thrift, and progress have made him a loyal benefactor to be remembered in the days to come as the man who made Huntsville." Indeed he almost single-handedly did during the early part of the twentieth century.

THE END

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