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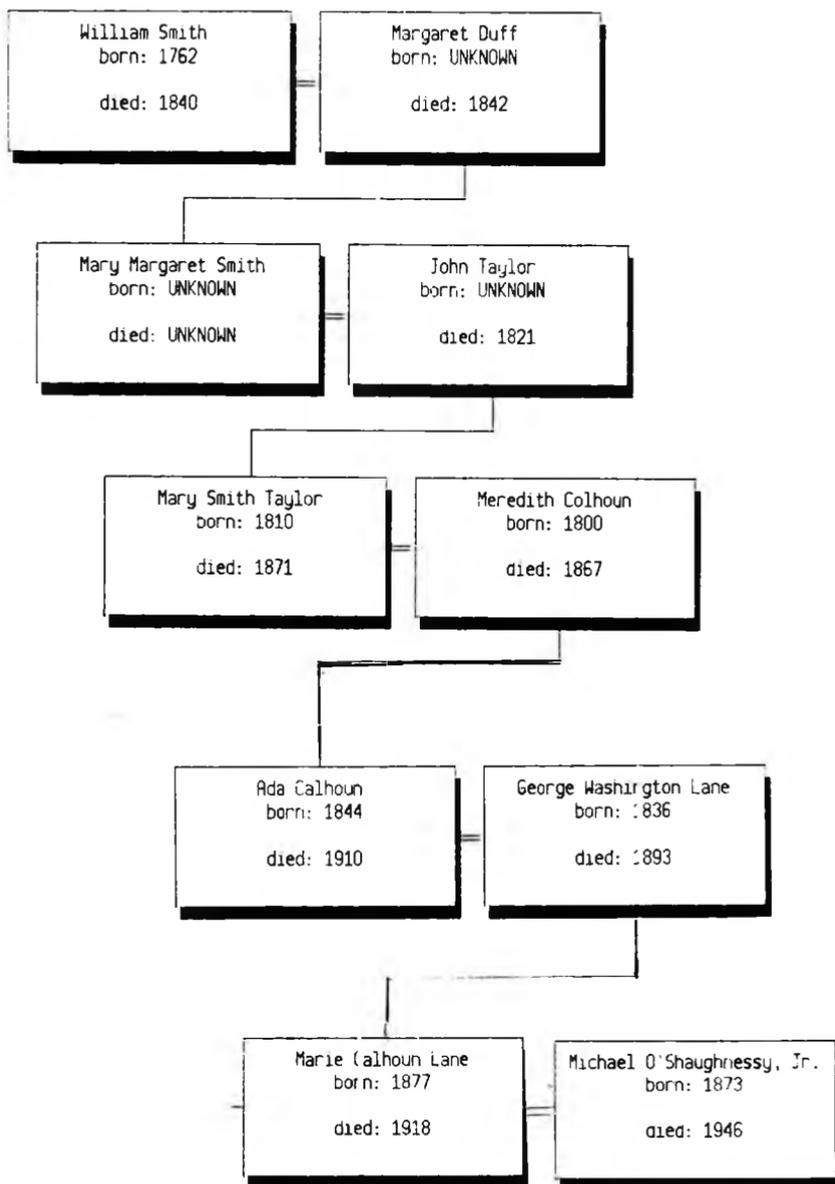
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# THE SMITH - O'SHAUGHNESSY CONNECTION



## THE O'SHAUGHNESSY LEGACY IN HUNTSVILLE

by  
Nancy Rohr

The name O'Shaughnessy comes easily to mind in Huntsville. There is O'Shaughnessy Street near the Five Points area and O'Shaughnessy Point on Monte Sano. In the past the O'Shaughnessy name was particularly associated with the arrival of the Dallas Mill to the community. This mill, as it dominated the people and the scene in east Huntsville, was a considerable influence in twentieth century life in the town. For many years the O'Shaughnessy name was related to the vigorous development of the "New South." However, today, although it is difficult to pinpoint actual events or recall leadership of the O'Shaughnessys in a tangible way, it would be a loss not to share the family personality and accomplishments.

The O'Shaughnessy legacy actually began much earlier than the family's entry into Huntsville. As a result, the story becomes difficult to follow--but well worth the pursuit. Not surprisingly, power and money were frequently prime movers in the events. Power and money are frequently, and not surprisingly, prime movers in events. If this article were only "family history," it would be about people. However, to truly understand events, historical data and events must combine with the lives of people. The O'Shaughnessy legacy begins with a seemingly unrelated set of names in the days of Huntsville's beginnings.

The earliest O'Shaughnessy connection goes back to one of the most distinguished early settlers in Huntsville, Judge William Smith and his extended family. They migrated to Huntsville in 1833 from South Carolina. The Judge was a politician of national note, a landholder of over 7,000 acres along the Red River in Louisiana, 4,000 acres in the Black Belt of Alabama, and almost 700 acres in Madison County. He purchased the entire east side of the public square in Huntsville including the Huntsville Inn, as well as other city lots. In 1833, well over the age of seventy, Smith, in a fit of anger or distrust, or both, left his home state of South Carolina and settled in Huntsville, Alabama. Here he immediately turned down a second appointment by President Jackson to the Supreme Court of the United States because he wanted to remain a private citizen, active and vocal in local politics. (1) A new residence was needed. Smith's initial order to the contractor for his townhouse to be located on the corner of Greene and Eustis Streets called for one million bricks (2) Unfortunately, Smith died before the house was completed, and his loyal widow died not much later in 1842. Smith left in his will a bequest for the great-grandsons. Each infant would receive the sum of \$50,000 at the age of twenty-one. His will read, "Believing as I do, if they are prudent and attentive to business these sums will furnish them with ample means of building up a large fortune as they could desire and should they become imprudent and dissipated, more would not be useful to them." (3)

Judge Smith's extended family included those who would eventually have a more lasting effect on activities in Huntsville. His wife was Margaret Duff Smith whose devotion he acknowledged had "settled him into the straight and narrow as a young man. Everything since then had turned to gold" for him. (4) His only grandchild, Mary Smith Taylor Colhoun, and her husband, Meredith Colhoun, and their sons. They lived in New Orleans, chose tactfully to use this spelling of their surname because the most bitter foe of the Judge (and there were many) was John C. Calhoun of South Carolina.

After 1842 the now Calhoun family (Meredith and Mary) moved to Paris, France, returning to Huntsville and the Louisiana properties only occasionally to attend to business affairs. Often in their travels, wonderful pieces of art were collected and sent back to be displayed at the mansion in Huntsville. It was their daughter, born in France in 1844, Maria Marguerite Ada Calhoun, who would later begin the connection with the O'Shaughnessy family. This young lady was flatteringly painted by F. X. Winterhalter in 1867 and danced at the royal court of Napoleon III in Paris. Hers was a life of complete luxury. Shortly after the Civil War ended, the Calhouns returned to the United States to attend to business affairs. They, like many other wealthy southern families, suffered financial losses which caused them to curtail their trips abroad. Meredith Calhoun died in New Orleans in 1867, and Mary followed him to the grave four years later.

Of the two Calhoun children to survive to adulthood, William Calhoun settled in Grant, Louisiana, and Ada made her home in New Orleans. There she met and married George Washington Lane, a lawyer who was originally from New York. After some disagreements, William and Ada finally divided what was left of the vast Smith estate. The properties in Louisiana were deeded to William and those in Alabama to Ada. The Calhoun House at the corner of Greene and Eustis, containing the extensive art collection, and almost 700 acres in the Huntsville area were included in her inheritance from her great-grandfather, Judge William Smith. (5)

The Lane's only child, Marie Calhoun Lane, was born in 1877. She was educated in the Catholic schools of New Orleans and exposed to the best social circles in both New Orleans and Huntsville, as they spent some time each year in Huntsville at the Calhoun House, and visited often with their good friends, Major Milton and Ellelee Chapman Humes. Ellelee's sister, Elizabeth Chapman, reminisced affectionately about the elaborate hospitality of the era in her book *Changing Huntsville*. (6)

The optimism and exuberance of the times were reflected in the reporting of social life in the *Huntsville Democrat*: "Local poetess and painter, Miss Howard Weeden, entertained at her home in compliment to Miss Marie Lane of New Orleans... Mrs. Ada Calhoun Lane with her charming daughter, Miss Marie, left for New Orleans on Saturday... Mrs. Milton Humes with Miss Marie Lane expect to leave this week for Newport News. Social life for those



Portrait of Marie Marguerite Ada Calhoun Lane  
by Franz Xavier Winterhalter

who stayed in town was also inviting: The Dresden China Ball at the Opera House passed brilliantly. Among those attending was one fresh to the social scene. Miss Anna O'Shaughnessy was beautifully costumed in blue silk and led one of the dances most gracefully. The ball at the Twickenham Club was led by Michael O'Shaughnessy, Jr." (7)

The O'Shaughnessy family had been introduced to Huntsville society in the latter part of the nineteenth century. O'Shaughnessy was indeed a new name to the area, but the name would last long after the events. This was a household that would have a tremendous effect on the economy of the slowly recovering post-war village as it prepared to enter the next century.

The O'Shaughnessy family came to the United States from Ireland in 1836. The first brother to arrive, Thomas, began in business as a dry goods merchant in Cincinnati. His business thrived and he established his own commission house for the sale of dry goods. His brother James joined him there in 1846. (8) James O'Shaughnessy had two sons, Michael James and James Francis, both born while the family was still living in Ireland. From their Irish roots the

place name, Kildare, would follow the family into Huntsville. As business prospered for the O'Shaughnessy families, young Michael and James attended St. Xavier's College in Cincinnati and joined the family firm. Both were listed in the city directory as salesmen and clerks, boarding at different houses about town. (9) The Civil War would give these young men a chance to leave clerking and practice skills that would later allow them to fulfill the American dream beyond any possible expectations.

As Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase appointed capable young men from his home district in Ohio to the Department of Treasury during the war years. Michael O'Shaughnessy worked with the archaic governmental bookkeeping and accounting techniques. He was quite innovative about developing ways to speed paperwork transactions. James F. worked just as effectively in the Quartermaster section. The O'Shaughnessy brothers acquired skills and business contacts that, along with an inherited predisposition for work and risk-taking, allowed them to begin building the future together. They were prepared for success as the war ended, and they used their military titles, assumed during the war, to identify themselves in the business world. Their newly-formed commission house in Nashville, Tennessee, was able to buy the very first cotton shipments to pass through that city at the end of the war in 1865. (10)

By 1868 in Nashville, Colonel James F. and Major Michael O'Shaughnessy opened a cottonseed oil factory, one of the first in the south. The Colonel soon moved to New York City where he bought property and made further business connections that allowed him to sell cottonseed oil abroad. While in the east, he married Lucy Waterbury, daughter of Judge Nelson J. Waterbury of Connecticut. Staying close to the south, Major Michael married Anna Pyles of a distinguished Nashville family that combined the heritage of such names as Donelson, Calhoun, and Hobson. This marriage added to distinguished and old moneyed families of the south new money and the vigor of immigrant dreams. (11)

The O'Shaughnessy brothers struggled with various ventures through Black Friday of the 1873 gold crisis, regrouped and were ready to expand again. By the 1880s northern Alabama had begun recovery from the destructive years of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The future, as seen by many local leaders, had to be in diversification. Any real future was advancement away from an economy based on the single crop of cotton. Leadership in north Alabama actively sought capital for the manufacture of thread and yarn, naturally connected with locally grown cotton. Industrialization was not far away. Fortunately, the Huntsville area also had a ready and waiting labor force available.

Michael J. O'Shaughnessy had already purchased the site of the abandoned machine shops of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad at Huntsville, and in 1881 built the Huntsville Cotton Oil Mill there. Both Michael and James recognized the potential growth opportunities to be derived from the nearby



The Monte Sano Dummy Line Railroad



"Castle Delight" -- Colonel James O'Shaughnessy's residence on Monte Sano

cotton fields and the available work force. The North Alabama Improvement Company was organized in 1886 to do this. The board of directors was composed of the two O'Shaughnessy brothers, eighteen local citizens, and two men from Memphis. The goal, with \$50,000 capital stock, was just what the name implied--improvement and development. (12) These were truly exciting times for a formerly sleepy little southern county. Real estate was being sold and bought everywhere with the expectation of boom times, oftentimes gathered up at sheriff's sale, sold, and resold for tremendous profits.

Exciting plans for the town included the building of the Monte Sano Hotel and a railroad up the mountain to that hotel. Downtown, the Huntsville Hotel was purchased and renovated. Arrangements called for a road from Huntsville to Guntersville and a railroad from Huntsville to Gadsden. Extremely important to the community was a new cotton mill, Dallas Mill, with the promise of 2,000 jobs, being planned in East Huntsville. Indeed, the city was becoming the "Queen City of the South." (13)

Adding to the sense of growth in the community, the O'Shaughnessy brothers built homes in the area and were on the scene at least some of the time to supervise their investments. "Castle Delight" was the name chosen by Colonel James for the fine residence developed on Monte Sano. He regularly entertained friends and business associates from the midwest and New York City on the mountain. The Colonel also donated money for a new iron fence and porch rail to St. Mary's Catholic Church in Huntsville, while his brother contributed glass windows and new pews. However, the Colonel and his family never entered into the activities of the community. In addition to the land bought for his estate and the cotton oil mill development, he did purchase immense acreage of land on speculation, including over 1100 acres of the old Clemens place in west Huntsville. For his role in entertaining, James F. O'Shaughnessy had begun building his summer home on Monte Sano in 1885. He also maintained a home at Buzzard's Bay, and later lived at the Waldorf in New York City. Because O'Shaughnessy had other fine estates, perhaps the loss of his Huntsville mansion to fire in March of 1890 was not important to him. His \$25,000 mansion was never rebuilt; J. F. O'Shaughnessy had other, more important, places to be.

Major Michael O'Shaughnessy, as the President of the Alabama Cotton Oil Company, actually moved his wife, Anna, and their children to Huntsville for several years. They left behind a handsome home in Nashville, Vauxhall Gardens, that had belonged to Anna's grandfather, Colonel Nicholas Hobson. Kildare, a fine new house in Huntsville was begun in 1882 and completed in 1886.. The building techniques of the New York crew were innovative and much admired by local workmen who often came to watch the construction. The cost was \$65,000 for more than 23,000 square feet of living space, and 50



"Kildare" -- Major Michael O'Shaughnessy's residence  
completed in 1886

rooms. (14) In 1889 the graceful hostess and gallant husband entertained at a brilliant reception, and the house was lighted by gas from basement to garret. The grounds were more than ample for his prize-winning stable and his foxhounds. The Major Michael O'Shaughnessy family lived at Kildare until 1900 when the house was purchased by Cyrus McCormick, one of several residences he maintained for his handicapped daughter, Virginia (15)

The family that moved into the fine new house included five children: Conrad, Michael Jr., Marion, Leonard, and Anna Maria. This family was not content to be mere backdrops, but entered into the public life of the community, and the community welcomed them eagerly with warm southern hospitality. Many of the social activities were gaily reported in the *Huntsville Democrat* in the fall of 1895: The brothers Conrad and Michael, Jr., played for opposing sides in a baseball game to benefit the Infirmary. It was the Manufacturers vs. the Bankers. ...Leo O'Shaughnessy returned from Cullman where he attended school [probably St. Bernard's]...Marion O'Shaughnessy led a pleasant German [cotillion] with Lizzie Halsey that year...The boys were musical and sang as members of a male quartet...The older brothers whirled to Whitesburg with the Spring City Cycling Club...Messrs. O'Shaughnessy shared in a moonlight coaching party to the river given by the lovely Franklin Street girls....Mesdames Virginia Clay-Clopton and O'Shaughnessy were appointed to a committee for the Atlanta Exposition. (16) Certainly the families were entertained lavishly by community leaders and particularly at the home of Ellelee and Milton Humes at Abingdon Place. The O'Shaughnessy family found it easy to meet the standard for gracious and elegant living that was expected of them as wealthy citizens. (17)

The five O'Shaughnessy children, after their school years, began to take their places in the social and business worlds. With the connections of the family, it is not surprising that the children became involved in the family enterprises. In 1895, after a year at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, MD, Michael, Jr. (only twenty-two years old) was appointed President of the Wisconsin Grass Twine Company in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. This company was testing ways to use the local wire-grass of the Dakota prairies to make worthwhile twine products. "Empire Builder" James J. Hill and other industry giants were involved in the planning. As it appears later, this certainly proved to be a great training place for young Michael O'Shaughnessy, Jr. (18) In 1896, again living at home, he was listed in the Huntsville City Directory as manager of the Excelsior Feed Company. According to the family, about the turn of the century, he again entered business enterprises in the midwest.

Conrad also went away to college and graduated from Mount St. Mary's in 1891. There he was offered a chance for advanced education leading to a professorship in Greek studies. It is not known what his preference would have been, but he returned to join the family enterprises as a clerk at the First National Bank and later as secretary of Alabama Cotton Oil Company. (19) Tragedy struck when Conrad O'Shaughnessy, age twenty, was run over and killed by a train at the Southern Railroad depot. It was midnight and he had

spent the afternoon and evening with companions. Although his family thought he had returned home and gone to bed, he had quietly left his room to rejoin his friends. Conrad was well liked, one of the best known young men in the city, and a leader in society. The funeral service at St. Mary's Catholic Church was so crowded, many who wanted to attend were turned away. (20)

In spite of this misfortune, there was a new prospect of future happiness. A courtship that may have begun in Huntsville, probably continued in the social world of Nashville and New Orleans. She, the great-great-granddaughter of Judge William Smith, was educated in the private schools of New Orleans. He, the son and nephew of enterprising, nationally recognized leaders, was educated in the formidable schools of business and finance. Certainly they would have moved in the same social circles wherever they were. Michael James O'Shaughnessy, Jr. married Marie Calhoun Lane on April 26th of 1899 in New Orleans at the Church of the Immaculate Conception. The mother of the bride, Ada, went down from Huntsville to be present at the wedding. The *Huntsville Democrat* had pronounced the prospective bride a great favorite, having spent some time in Huntsville each year. "She has a sweet disposition, charming manner, cultivated talents and beauty [which] have won her unbounded admiration and homage...wherever she visited. He is a gentleman equally admired for his attributes as a man and scholar." Good wishes of their Huntsville friends might follow them for life. (21)



Michael James O'Shaughnessy, Jr.



Marie Calhoun Lane O'Shaughnessy

The marriage service was conducted by Archbishop Allen of Alabama, a friend of both the bride and groom, assisted by two other priests. The bridal veil was lace "woven for the Empress Eugenie and afterwards purchased by Miss Lane's grandfather [Meredith Calhoun] who was minister to France during the second empire, for his daughter, the bride's mother." She also carried "a pearl and lace fan, a gift to her mother, who used it on her wedding day, from the Empress Eugenie." (22)

The bride, according to the account, was given away by her guardian, Major Humes of Huntsville. The groom's brother Marion attended. Perhaps conspicuous by their absence, no other members of his family attended. Indeed it was a small wedding party. There were girls at the wedding with whom Marie had attended the Academy of Sacred Heart or had known socially. His ushers and her mother completed the wedding party. This marriage united young people of two families of capital, property, and potential. He appeared to have endless money and energy; she appeared to have an immense estate and wealth.

Meanwhile in Huntsville the 1890s had been exciting years. Many men saw the possibilities for growth and development. A fifty-acre site was donated by the North Alabama Improvement Company as an inducement for the Dallas Mill to locate and begin construction in the spring of 1891. (23) This was only part of the land, formerly owned by Ada Calhoun Lane as part of her inheritance from the estate of her great-grandfather. In 1885 she had sold 723 acres to James F. O'Shaughnessy for \$12,500 which was only a fraction of its actual worth. Because her husband became ill and had to be institutionalized, Ada began to rely on the advice of those she must have trusted. Evidently she depended too much for advice from the O'Shaughnessy brothers or Milton Humes, and as a result lost most of her valuable assets in Alabama.

The influence of the O'Shaughnessy brothers in Huntsville began to fade as they became debt-ridden with too many projects and sought a solution to their problems. In 1892, James F. O'Shaughnessy was successful in selling the assets of the North Alabama Improvement Company to a group of developers from Pierre, South Dakota, who formed the Northwest Land Association, and continued to promote the economic development of Huntsville that had been started in the 1880s. Soon local investors were able to purchase shares in this and other mill factories in town. Housing sites were needed for the mill workers and other prospective job seekers. One financial maneuver involved offering land for sale that would become known as the East Huntsville Addition. Streets were laid out and 1,200 home lots were planned for sale. These plans generally followed the original layout proposed by developers in 1888. Once again, the shape of the city blocks followed the original plantation boundaries of Judge Smith. (24)

Progress, in the form of the Dallas Mill, was here to stay. From the outlying districts of the county, workers came to town to construct and work in the mill.



Dallas Mill, 1892-1991

A dependable livelihood was available to families who had struggled to make a living as tenant farmers. The community was on its way to substantial economic growth.

During the years of this activity, Michael O'Shaughnessy stayed on the scene in Huntsville, while his brother, James F. O'Shaughnessy, continued with plans for other growth opportunities elsewhere. In Pensacola, Florida, a first-class harbor on the Gulf of Mexico could be developed, Brunswick, Georgia, had the potential to be a great seaport on the south Atlantic coast, linked by rail to St. Louis, via Huntsville. It could combine a port of entry for trade from South America and serve as an eastern terminus of the Southern Pacific Railroad. (25)

These schemes seem paltry when compared to his really grand ambition. Perhaps the greatest promotion James F. O'Shaughnessy pursued was the purchase of a franchise for \$100,000 for a Central American Canal, and a company organized with capital of \$60,000,000. In spite of monumental plans, all did not go well. Unfortunately, O'Shaughnessy intended the Atlanta-Pacific canal site to be in Nicaragua, but instead Congress chose to build it in Panama. It might seem that the failure of the canal company pulled cash from Georgia and Florida sites and eventually from Huntsville--cash that was in the hands of

other family members. But in truth, the Huntsville branches of the Lane and O'Shaughnessy families were already overextended.

By this time the original properties of Judge Smith in Louisiana were also on their way to being lost. It would seem that Ada Calhoun Lane's life had become very complicated. Her husband was first mentally ill and then hospitalized until his death four years later in 1893. She continued to rely on her friend Milton Humes and others for help and advice. (26) The estate in Huntsville was soon gone, sold or tied in eventually with the land development schemes of the O'Shaughnessy brothers and Milton Humes. Poor advice had become bad advice; following the death of her husband, she was declared insolvent. Ada Calhoun Lane died in 1910, most probably living with her daughter and son-in-law. Her life had not been simple, but the family pictures almost always showed her cheerful and laughing.

Milton Humes appeared to have in his hands, at one time or another, much of Ada's property. Prior to March of 1887, Humes was her attorney and managing agent. Adding to the loss of her family inheritance, in March of 1887 while still living much of the time in New Orleans, Ada sold to Ellelee and Major Humes the entire Huntsville city block enclosed within the brick wall built some forty years before, the fine home, and the fabulous Calhoun art collection gathered so carefully for the sum of \$25,000. On August 1st of that year Humes sold the residence and the four lots of the block to James F. O'Shaughnessy for \$25,000. (27)

By this time Milton Humes had become a participant on a large scale, along with the O'Shaughnessy family, in the land development plans. He was a true opportunist, outgoing, and well-positioned socially; his wife was the daughter of former governor Reuben Chapman. Much of the time Humes's business affairs appeared to be highly profitable, but in reality he was experiencing enormous financial losses. The remaining bits of Ada's estate were also lost at this time. His affairs in disarray, Milton Humes unexpectedly died at his home, Abingdon Place, on December 30, 1908. The *Huntsville Democrat* wished "peace to his ashes." (28)

Meanwhile, family life for the Michael O'Shaughnessy, Sr., family continued to focus in Huntsville only for a short time longer. Of the O'Shaughnessy children, Marion Thomas also attended Mount St. Mary's for two years. His fortune was made away from the family in New York City where he quite successfully entered the rare book trade. The youngest boy, Leo, had attended St. Bernard's in Cullman. Family stories related about him are quite vague; the date and place of his death are unknown. Rumor has suggested that he met an untimely death, perhaps violently. The baby of the family, Anna Maria, married a man twenty years her senior, Randall Currell, a Nashville banker. (29)

In the midst of business difficulties, Michael and wife, Anna Pyles O'Shaughnessy, unfortunately brought personal difficulties before the county



Abindon Place, the home of Milton Humes  
(no longer standing)

court in April of 1893. This action may have been an attempt to hide family assets, but the court records have the ring of genuine anger. Major O'Shaughnessy acknowledged debts owed to his wife of over \$35,000. She accepted as payment parcels of land and personal property. Itemized personal household items included the piano, books, the buggies, the garden tools, even the children's pony, Mingo. (31) Members of the family always thought there had been a divorce. It is not known where O'Shaughnessy, Sr. spent his later years or what work absorbed his energy. The date and location of his death are not known. Today, his lost wealth in Huntsville is recalled only in memories of how things might have been--the fine home, the gay social life.

Colonel James F. O'Shaughnessy died in 1914 in New York. His important business accomplishments were listed in the death notice, with just a hint of fortunes won and lost. He was recognized as the father of Nelson O'Shaughnessy, then the American charge d'affaires in Mexico. (31)

Michael O'Shaughnessy, Jr., and his wife, Marie Calhoun Lane O'Shaughnessy, enjoyed business successes and financial ruin more than once. Among his own investment losses, he was pulled down with the failure of Nicaraguan Canal bonds he personally owned. Michael, Jr. and Marie had three children, of whom their first son, Michael III, died in 1916, sadly followed in two years by his mother. Marie O'Shaughnessy was particularly noted in her obituary as a leader in the women's suffrage movement, a cause she had championed in Huntsville. (32) Michael, after still more business failures, became a leader in South American oil production and publisher of a world newsletter about the petroleum industry. As the years progressed, he would have said his finest achievement was the founding of the Catholic League for Social Justice in 1931. ((33) Michael O'Shaughnessy, Jr. almost the last of those who were personally touched by Huntsville and the original Smith inheritance, died in 1946 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. (34)

Today the combination of Smith money and O'Shaughnessy energy has left little tangible evidence. Kildare Place still stands and is being lovingly cared for by its present owner. There is O'Shaughnessy Street; downtown there are streets named Calhoun and Smith. Of course the chimney left from the Monte Sano Hotel on the mountain is still standing. The streets and layout of the mill village are changed somewhat but currently appear revitalized.

The energy and ambition of the O'Shaughnessy brothers, J. Francis and Michael, were major factors contributing to the development of the Dallas Mill in Huntsville. The factory was begun in 1891 and enlarged in 1899 to 330,000 square feet. At its peak Dallas Mill employed 1,200 people. Other mills followed: West Huntsville Cotton Mill, Merrimack Manufacturing, Lowe, Rowe, West Huntsville and Madison mills. "Huntsville became the second-ranking cotton mill town in the south. (35)

The economy of the city was to have a new framework of vigorous workers and healthy growth. Almost all those employed at the mills and the other

factories related to the textile industry were from northern Alabama. Many former mill workers and their families are proud evidence of those days. Though the Dallas Mill had closed down in 1947, the building was a landmark for many years. Unfortunately, it burned in a spectacular nighttime blaze on July 24, 1991. It was a heartbreaking time for the Dallas community.

The contributions of the O'Shaughnessy family were important to Huntsville and Madison County because they were made at a time when their optimistic plans helped to replace the years of slow and painful reconstruction after the Civil War. The spirit of optimism which they brought with them to Huntsville in the 1880s lingered after they left, and others followed their example in promoting the economic growth of the city.

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(33) Forster, p. 6.

(34) Correspondence with Tybring Hemphill, an O'Shaughnessy family member who supplied many additional details.

(35) Flynt, Wayne. *Poor But Proud*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989.

The following is a transcription of an article which appeared in a Huntsville newspaper in the year 1911.

#### ART TREASURES SENT FROM THIS CITY TO CHICAGO

"The tender grace of a day that is dead will never [word obliterated] me."

Some weeks ago several heavily loaded drays were seen wending their way slowly toward the Nashville depot. The casual passerby glanced with a degree of curiosity at the huge boxes, but little dreamed what a regrettable page in Huntsville's history was being turned, for much of the glory of by-gone days passes out with the sale of the valuable Calhoun collection of paintings and statuary. In...ly [instantly?] changed is social life in Huntsville, it is doubtful if many of our citizens know that a private home in this town had for over seventy years held the largest and most valuable art collection in the South. We believe there is no exaggeration in this statement and challenge any denial for accuracy. While journeymen are pulling down the last remaining walls of the Calhoun house, and on the gate of Abingdon Place the handsome suburban residence of the lamented Colonel Milton Humes hangs a placard "For Sale," these two residences for nearly three quarters of a century held these beautiful things, one naturally falls into a reminiscent mood recalling the glory on a "day that is done."

The Calhoun house now being demolished was built by Judge William Smith at a cost it is said of seventy-five thousand dollars, a big sum in those days. Judge Smith, a South Carolinian by birth and rearing, represented his native state in the United States Senate for many years, until some political upheaval following the "nullification act" driving him from his native heath, he brought his family and fortune to Huntsville where his remaining years were spent, and where his body lies.

Judge Smith's estate passed to his granddaughter, Mary Smith Taylor, daughter of John Taylor of South Carolina. This granddaughter subsequently married Meredith Calhoun, a Philadelphian, who after his marriage came to Huntsville and resided in the grand old mansion which has since become known as the Calhoun house. In those days when millionaires were not plentiful, the fortune of the Calhouns was considered enormous. They became patrons of art, spending most of their time in foreign travel, journeying in their own traveling coach, one of the most luxurious of that age before Pullman cars were in use. For twenty-five years or more, except the occasional visits to their American home to look after large interests in Alabama and Louisiana, the Calhouns resided abroad, Traveling when they pleased, they had ample time and means to acquire one of the choicest art galleries to be found in the Southland.

It was about 1837 that the two Sabatellis were sent over to their private gallery in the old Calhoun house. These two originals, "Tasso Reciting His Poems at Court," and the "Mother of the Gracchi" or "Cornelia and Her Jewels",

purchased at what was then considered a fabulous sum attracted much attention among art circles in this country. The artist, Giuseppi Sabatelli, court painter to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Leopold Second, was at the head of the Academy of Fine Arts at Florence, and the most popular painter of his time. Mr. and Mrs. Calhoun naturally desired to own some of his works and succeeded in negotiating the purchase of these two masterpieces. The purchase however met with the disapproval of the King who endeavored to forbid the sale of these two valuable originals. But Leopold's wrathful objections came too late, the sale having been concluded and the King had to content himself with making Sabatelli promise never to permit one of his paintings to leave Italy again. Many of this master's works are to be seen in the galleries of that country. Some of the best are in the Santa Croce Church at Florence where Sabatelli sleeps under a magnificent mausoleum. The above mentioned paintings are among those which Huntsville has just lost. The collection was shipped to Chicago, where under the hands of an expert they will be restored and exhibited and doubtless will attract much attention among art critics. One of the originals by a Dutch artist of the 17th century named Droosch-Sloot bears on the canvas the artist's name in full and the date 1633. Another original "The Coliseum at Rome," a large canvas, bears the impress of a master's hand and will add luster to any gallery in which it may hang. But notice will be especially made in the exhibition of these paintings, of the reproductions, copies of the gems of the Pitti, the Uffizi and other galleries. The art critic who was sent from Chicago to pass upon these works of art pronounced these copies the finest he had ever seen, saying they must all have been done by masters, adding "they are gems which no money could buy at the present day."

The marble statues which are included in this collection will command attention wherever exhibited, nearly all being originals. The life-size figure of "Prayer" by Bartolini will at once be recognized as the equal of any piece of marble which has come to America, and cannot pass unnoticed. The exquisite statue of "Paris Throwing the Apple to Venus," Thomas Crawford's first original, should go into some public museum or adorn a niche in the Congressional Library building under the dome which bears Crawford's name. The proper place also for the bust of Ceres by Tadolini is in a public gallery, as there are but few Tadolinis in America. This one, a gem, should not be hid under a bushel.

The "Venus of the Bath," a life-size draped figure after Canova, will rank as high as the originals, being executed under Canova by Pampolino, one of his pupils who afterwards became famous. Many considered this and a small Venus also after Canova (the original being in the Uffizi) the most beautiful pieces in the Calhoun gallery.

Included in this collection is a large table, two and a half feet in diameter, of Florentine mosaic said to be one of the rarest specimens of art which was ever done in this city of gems. It contains every specimen of this art for which

Florence is renowned: flowers, fruit, insects, shells, etc. finished with a shaded border of augilichite....[illegible] black onyx set in ...[illegible] wrought.

The two handsome pieces of bronze, Pluto and Neptune, originals by Drouillard, have been added to the collection with other things by the last owner and will be exhibited with the others.

Huntsville's loss will be Chicago's gain, but we cannot refrain from dropping tears of sincere regret at the passing of so much of the art of our little Spring City.

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON ART IN 19TH CENTURY HUNTSVILLE

by

John Rison Jones, Jr.

The recent sale of two Huntsville-related works of art at New Orleans auction houses brings to mind little-known aspects of the cultural life of Huntsville in the pre-Civil War period, especially the Meredith Calhoun collection which was believed to be one of the "largest and most valuable art collections in the south," (1) The art world of Huntsville in the nineteenth century has never been properly researched, nor has much been written about the artists who plied their trade in the city. Much work needs to be undertaken to catalog the remaining treasures of this fascinating period. (2)

What of the works that were auctioned? The first was a large historical painting by William Frye, the noted portrait painter. (3) "The Legend of Florinda" was painted here in 1862 and signed in the usual Frye manner on the back of the canvas. The painting was purchased by General Waddy Thompson of South Carolina and sold by his descendants. General Thompson earned his military status during the Cherokee Wars, served in the United States Congress, and was perhaps distantly related to the Governor Thomas Bibb family. (4) "Florinda" is a major departure from the kind of art associated with Frye. It is a copy of the well-known work by Franz Xavier Winterhalter, the noted artist at the courts of Queen Victoria of England and Napoleon III of France. Evidently Winterhalter painted several versions of the work, since one is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and we know that Queen Victoria purchased a copy to present to Prince Albert on his birthday, May 21, 1851. This version hung in the Queen's Sitting Room at the small palace at Osborne. (5) The Frye painting, estimated to bring between \$6,000 and \$8,000 sold for a record \$23,000 which is a major sum for an otherwise obscure artist associated with Alabama.

The second work was a huge portrait--some 9 feet 5 inches by 7 feet 2 inches--of Ann Eliza Harris James who died in Huntsville in 1908 at age 90, attributed to the noted artist, George Cooke, who worked with Charles Byrd King on Indian portraits for Thomas McKenney in Washington in the 1820s.. Cooke eventually came south to Georgia where he befriended the architect Daniel Pratt before moving on to New Orleans. (6) One can wonder how George Cooke painted a Huntsville portrait. It is possible that the commission resulted from a possible friendship between Daniel Pratt and Huntsville's George Steele Mrs. Steele, Eliza Weaver, had a sister, Judith, who married Henry Macon Harris, the first cousin of Mrs. James's father, William Harris. (7)

During a moment of reflection about the James portrait and its loss to Huntsville, one can visualize how difficult it must have been to crate this substantial painting for its journey to Eason cousins who lived in Desoto County, Mississippi, after Mrs. James's death. She lived in a large house on North Greene Street near the site of the present Todd Towers. (8) The sheer

size of the painting must have unnerved the movers! That sudden image brings to mind a similar incident in Huntsville history recorded in 1910: (9)

"Some weeks ago several heavily loaded drays were seen wending their way slowly toward the Huntsville depot. The casual passerby glanced with a nervous curiosity at the huge boxes, but little dreamed what a regrettable page in Huntsville's history was being formed, for much of the glory of by-gone days passes out with the sale of the valuable Calhoun collection of paintings and sculpture and instantly changed is the social life in Huntsville.... While journeymen are pulling down the last remaining walls of the Calhoun house, and on the gate of Abingdon Place, the handsome suburban residence of the lamented Colonel Milton Humes, hangs a placard "For Sale," these two residences for nearly three-quarters of a century have held these beautiful things..."

Elsewhere in this publication Nancy Rohr discusses Judge William Smith and some of his descendants, including Meredith Calhoun and his wife, Mary Smith Taylor Calhoun. The purpose of this essay is to explore what is known about their extensive art collection. They were great patrons of the arts and spent a considerable period of their lives in foreign travel and residence. And travel in style they did! The newspapers reported that their traveling coach was one of the most luxurious for the time "before Pullmans were in use." For more than 25 years, except for occasional visits to attend to their affairs and large interests in Alabama and Louisiana, the Calhouns lived abroad. Art purchases were shipped to the great mansion on Eustis Avenue built for Judge Smith by Thomas and William Brandon. The informative article on the Calhoun house by Linda Bayer [Allen] is a "must read" for Huntsville cultural life. (10)

But what of the collection? It is known that it was sold by Ada Calhoun Lane, Meredith Calhoun's daughter, to Milton and Ellelee Chapman Humes in 1887 for \$25,000, and subsequently removed from Eustis Avenue to the Humes residence on Meridian Street, Abingdon Place. Mrs. Humes sold the collection to Eli P. Clark of Los Angeles on November 11, 1910, for \$60,000, and the collection left Huntsville for Chicago, prior to its ultimate destination in California.

The collection consisted primarily of copies of great masterpieces by such European masters as Titian, Raphael, Carravagio, and Remi. It is the size of the collection that is impressive: 23 oils and 8 sculptures. Note in the accompanying list of the collection (as it is now known) the size of individual paintings.

Two works have an interesting history--those of Guiseppe Sabatelli. While his work is virtually unknown today, in the 1830s the purchase by Meredith Calhoun of these two oils caused an uproar in Florence at the court of the Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany. He attempted to prevent the export of these works from Florence, but the sale had been completed. Nevertheless, Leopold

banned any future export of Sabatelli's works. Guiseppe Sabatelli, the son of artist Luigi Sabatelli, was the head of the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. (11)

The other works, with the exception of Joost-Cornelisz Droogsloot's "Pool of Bethesda" (signed and dated 1633) were copies. Certainly oil copies of major works of art were common. There were few reproductive mechanisms except etchings. Lithography had only been introduced into the United States in 1818 and color lithography did not reach maturity until the late nineteenth century. Travelers or collectors in Europe had no recourse but to purchase etchings as reproductions or oil copies. Consequently, southern houses were filled in the nineteenth century with small copies of noted works, usually brought back to this country after a "Grand Tour."

The Calhoun copies, however, were pronounced by a Chicago art critic sent to examine the collection for Mr. Clark as "the best he had ever seen," saying "they must all have been done by masters.... gems which no money could buy at the present time." (12)

The most noted portion of the collection must be the sculptures, especially the two works by American sculptor, Thomas Crawford, best known for his works in the United States Capitol. Like so many other American artists in the nineteenth century, Crawford lived primarily in Rome where the Calhouns purchased "Paris Throwing the Apple" (1837) and the bust of George Washington. Crawford's best known work is "Freedom" which adorns the dome of the Capitol in Washington, DC. He executed the great east portico frieze, "The Progress of Civilization," for the Senate side of the building. He also created the massive bronze doors for that side of the building. These doors depict major events in the life of Washington, and the House doors relate to various episodes in American history. (13)

The Lorenzo Bartolini "Prayer" may have been a strategic purchase for the Calhouns, inasmuch as they spent much time at the court of Napoleon III. Bartolini is best known for the numerous busts of members of the Bonaparte family--Jerome, Marie Anne, Joseph, the Empress Josephine, and Napoleon I.

Although the Calhoun collection has passed into history, it is interesting to add that not all items from the collection left the family. Descendants now living in British Columbia have several items of note: miniatures of William Smith and his wife; marble busts assumed to be Meredith Calhoun and his wife; a reproduction of the handsome portrait by Franz Xavier Winterhalter of Marie Marguerite Ada Calhoun who married George Washington Lane of New Orleans. (See photograph on page 3.) Family tradition has it that Ada's neck was so beautiful that Winterhalter used it as a model for the Empress Eugenie. And there is a wonderful daguerreotype of Meredith Calhoun looking very French. He has a Napoleonic goatee, is dressed in the latest fashion, and is depicted in a typical paneled French salon. (14)

Although it is not clear even today how extensive the Calhoun collection was, the items sold in 1887 and again in 1910 are recorded as an addendum to this article.

As more research is done into little known aspects of Huntsville's cultural history, further evidence of the unique character of the early city becomes clearer. It is possible to call the Calhoun collection the first Museum of Art in Huntsville. It is known that the public could view the collection at specific times. One can imagine the delight of the young student artists at the Huntsville Female Seminary and the Huntsville Female College upon viewing European masterpieces with their teachers.

To return to William Frye and "The Legend of Florinda," is it possible that Meredith Calhoun may have brought to Huntsville a copy of the Winterhalter--an etching, or perhaps an *Illustrated London News*--that Frye had access to? It is known that Frye copied an engraving of the Battle of Mobile Bay which appeared in *Harper's Weekly*. This work is now in the Museum of the South in Mobile. Somehow it is more romantic to forge a Calhoun-Frye linkage with "Florinda."

#### ENDNOTES

- (1) "Art Treasures Sent from This City to Chicago." Unidentified clipping from a Huntsville newspaper, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.
- (2) The Birmingham Museum of Art is organizing a significant exhibition entitled "Made in Alabama" which will be on view at the Huntsville Museum of Art in early 1995. Bryding Adams, Curator of American Art, has organized this important look at Alabama's decorative arts history. Research was undertaken in northern Alabama by Catherine Estes of the Museum.
- (3) Adams, Bryding. "William Frye, Artist." *Alabama Heritage*, Spring, 1994, Volume 32, pp. 30-38.
- (4) *Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, Government Printing Office, 1971, p. 1812. See Saunders, Col. James Edmonds. *Early Settlers of Alabama*, Genealogical Publishing Company, 1969 (Reprint), pp. 469 ff.
- (5) Millar, Oliver. *The Queen's Pictures. The History of the British Royal Collection*. MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1977, p. 172.
- (6) Banks, William Nathaniel. "George Cooke. Painter of the American Scene." *The Magazine Antiques* (September 1972), Vol. CII, no. 3,

pp. 448-454. Keyes, Donald D. *George Cooke, 1793-1849*. Athens, University of Georgia Press.

- (7) Research undertaken by the author for the Huntsville Museum of Art Acquisitions Committee, June, 1994.
- (8) *Huntsville City Directory, 1895*. Microfilm of the Sanborn Fire Maps for Huntsville, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.
- (9) See Note (1).
- (10) Bayer, Linda. "The Calhoun House." *Historic Huntsville Quarterly*, Spring-Summer, 1983, pp. 29-36.
- (11) Benezit. *Dictionnaire Des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Gravues*.
- (12) See Note (1).
- (13) *Art in the United States Capitol*, Government Printing Office, 1976, pp. 346-349; 383.
- (14) Personal correspondence with Calhoun descendants now living in British Columbia.

THE MEREDITH CALHOUN ART COLLECTION

TITLE	SIZE	MEDIUM	SURFACE	PAINTER	DESCRIPTION
Mother of the Gracchi	60 X 78	Oil	Canvas	Giuseppe Sabatelli	1837; Original work
Tasso Reading His Poems	60 X 78	Oil	Canvas	Giuseppe Sabatelli	1837; Original
Pool of Bethesda	20 X 25	Oil	Wood	J-C Drooghsloot	1633; Signature
Coliseum at Rome	48 X 60	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Ruins in Greece	45 X 60	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Sunset	20 X 25	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Travelers	20 X 25	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Storm at Sea	25 X 40	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Persian Sybil	28 X 50	Oil	Unknown		After Giochino
Holy Family	48 X 61	Oil	Or. Wood		Copy after Raphael known as De La Impanato
Madonna and Child	41 X 36	Oil	Canvas		Copy after Murillo
Madonna and Child	28 X 28	Oil	Canvas		Copy after Raphael, known as De la Sedia
Coronation of the Virgin	36 X 50	Oil	Unknown		After Raphael
Holy Family	20 X 25	Oil	Canvas		"Fine Florentine Frame"
Fruit Girl	30 X 38	Oil	Unknown		After Titian
Lavinia	30 X 37	Oil	Canvas		After Titian
Fortune tellers	38 X 53	Oil	Canvas		After Caravaggio
Gamblers	38 X 53	Oil	Canvas		After Caravaggio
Crucifixion of Saint Andrew	39 X 42	Oil	Wood (Walnut)		After Carlo Dolci
Aurora	40 X 77	Oil	Canvas		After Guido Remi
Michael and the Dragon	30 X 57	Oil	Canvas		After Guido Remi
Mary Magdalene with Alabaster Box	24 X 30	Oil	Canvas		After Carlo Dolci
Holy Family	31 X 25	Oil	Wood		After Raphael

TITLE	SCULPTOR	DESCRIPTION
Prayer	Bartolini	Original including marble pedestal
Paris Throwing the Apple	Thomas Crawford	Marked T. Crawford; Rome 1837 including pedestal
Marble Head of Washington	Thomas Crawford	Including mahogany pedestal
Marble bust: head of Ceres	Copy (?)	Original by Todolini, including mahogany pedestal
Venus of the Bath	Pompalino	After Canova, including marble pedestal
Venus of the Rock	Pompalino	After Canova, including marble pedestal
Pluto and Ceres	G. Trouillard	Bronze (May have been Humes purchase)
Neptune	G. Trouillard	Bronze (May have been Humes purchase)

A large Florentine Mosaic table set in solid brass with solid brass pedestal and base.



Old Town Marker

This marker, the second in a series of historical markers funded by the City of Huntsville, was recently installed on Holmes Avenue. Dedication ceremonies are being planned by the Old Town Historical Association.

Other markers in the planning stages include those at Dallas Village and Merrimack-Huntsville Park.

The Marker Committee of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society is also planning to publish a booklet that will include pictures and descriptions of the historic markers in the city and county.



If you know someone who may be interested in becoming a member of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, please share this application for membership.

HUNTSVILLE-MADISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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Signature



The purpose of this society is to afford an agency for expression among those having a common interest in collecting, preserving and recording the history of Huntsville and Madison County. Communications concerning the organization should be addressed to the President at P. O. Box 666, Huntsville, Alabama 35804.

Manuscripts for possible publication should be directed to the Publications Committee at the same address. Articles should pertain to Huntsville or Madison County. Articles on the history of other sections of the state will be considered when they relate in some way to Madison County. All copy, including footnotes, should be double spaced. The author should submit an original and one copy.

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