

THE HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL REVIEW

Winter-Spring 2001

Volume 28

No. 1

PUBLISHED BY

The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

OFFICERS
of the
HUNTSVILLE-MADISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2000-2001

PRESIDENT
George Mahoney, Jr.

Vice President-Programs.....Ranee Pruitt
Vice President-Membership.....Leatrice Cole
Recording Secretary.....Lois Robertson
Corresponding Secretary.....Dorothy Luke
Treasurer.....Norman Shapiro

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

David Byers
Helen Caudle

Ira Jones
F. Alex Luttrell

Ex-Officio Directors
(past presidents who are still active)

Sarah Fisk
John Rison Jones, Jr.
James W. Lee

Dorothy Prince Luke
Joyce Smith
Alice Thomas

The Huntsville Historical Review
John Rison Jones, Jr., Interim Editor

PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

Nan G. Hall

Dorothy Scott Johnson

Alice Thomas

THE HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL REVIEW

Volume 28

No. 1

Winter-Spring 2001

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
A MEMORY OF FRANCES	
By Jack Ellis	1
LEROY POPE'S POPLAR GROVE PLANTATION	
By John Rison Jones, Jr.	3
AN EARLY MEETING	9
MARKER COMMITTEE PUBLISHES NEW BOOK FEATURING 79 HISTORICAL MARKERS IN MADISON COUNTY	
By F. Alex Luttrell, III	11
MEDARIS: PRIVATE – GENERAL – PRIEST	
By Lee James	23



Frances Cabaniss Roberts
1916-2000

A MEMORY OF FRANCES

By
Jack Ellis

Although the views and methods that Frances Roberts brought to the study of the past were those of her own generation, her life exhibited certain timeless qualities that future historians should strive to emulate.

There was her curiosity about people, her intellectual rigor, her insistence on academic standards, and her love of students. These, along with a deep-rooted tenacity, marked her career from her first years of teaching in Depression-stricken Sumter County to her later leadership in creating a university in Huntsville. They were especially evident in her quest for the doctorate during the 1950s, at a time when history faculties routinely discriminated against women.

Most fascinating to me personally were the ways in which Frances's own private connection to the land and people of her state revealed itself in all that she was and did.

Years ago I spent a day with her in tiny Gainesville, place of her birth, located along the Tombigbee in the heart of the Black Belt. "Once capital of a cotton principality," as the *WPA Guide* described in 1941, the town and its four hundred or so inhabitants, more than three-fourths of them black, had been a thriving community in Frances's youth.

Today, both the town and the land seem impoverished and exhausted, haunted by the ghosts of the past—of French and Spanish traders, of despoiled Choctaws and enslaved Africans, of Confederate dead. At its center is an oddly abstract design—"the only place in Alabama where the town square is a triangle," Frances explained—and one is greeted there by a stone marker commemorating the spot where Nathan Bedford Forrest surrendered to General Canby of the Union Army in 1865. Only the last lines of tribute to Forrest's men can easily be made out: "Nor Shall Their Glory Be Forgot While Fame Her Record Keeps."

Later we drove along unmarked streets whose names Frances still remembered, past overgrown lots and rusting trailers where once stood the houses of the druggist and the lawyer and the preacher. Stopping at the Presbyterian Church, largely abandoned now but magnificent in its old age, we entered a vestibule still proudly displaying a framed map from 1858 showing the location of missions worldwide. Inside, one gazes over the benches and up to the slave gallery on the right.

Back in the car, Frances pointed across a meadow to a vacant house with a solitary oak out front. She told me that during Reconstruction a black man had been lynched there while on his way to seek protection from a federal judge in a nearby town. She paused, then added: "Some of the locals think it's fun to dress

up in gray and Confederate re-enactments on weekends in the meadow. All they're really trying to do is intimidate the black people."

At her ancestral home, a two-story frame house with gallery built in the years before the Civil War, "Miss Frances" was warmly greeted by neighbors. Inside, the rooms were filled with four-poster beds and Victorian chests, and the walls held photographs of Frances and her sister as young women, dressed in 1930s attire. In its day, the house was a comfortable dwelling, fitting testimony to her father's standing as the local grocer and her mother's position as postmistress, though time and the elements have warped the floors.

From such small and obscure places, enveloped in layers of memory, come powerful voices in art, literature, and the historical imagination. In the case of Frances's hometown, one could cite the names of black blues musicians and gospel singers, like Jaybird Coleman and Olice Thomas, not to mention the great missionary Maria Fearing, founder of the Pantops Home for Girls in the Congo, who was born in slavery on a Gainesville plantation and was recently inducted into the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame, sixty-three years after her death.

In her own way, Frances was one of these voices, a voice of passion and authenticity, rare virtues in an age of rootlessness. Her origins, I think, help account for her all-consuming drive to understand the world from which she came. I cannot say whether, deep down, she ever felt that she had succeeded. I do know that with her passing, and that of Harvie Jones, master architect and apostle of preservationism, Huntsville has lost two of its best friends. But their legacy is still around us for all to see.

November 13, 2000

LEROY POPE'S POPLAR GROVE PLANTATION

By

John Rison Jones, Jr.

When the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society placed an Alabama Historical Association marker at the LeRoy Pope mansion on Echols Avenue in 1999, there was much concern that the residence was called "Poplar Grove Plantation" on the marker. No one could remember the residence as having a name. In the absence of any other distinguishing characteristics, if one referred to the house, it was generally understood to be "Echols Hill." However, the Echols ownership of the property dated from 1866 when Mary Beirne Patton Echols inherited the property at the death of her father, Dr. Charles Hays Patton. The residence itself dates from 1814. So, how did the discovery of "Poplar Grove Plantation" develop?

Among the by-products of research in preparation for the first volume recording the monuments and inscriptions in Maple Hill Cemetery¹ were the many legal transactions involving the disposition of the real estate of William H. Pope, the son of LeRoy Pope. About eleven years before his death, LeRoy Pope transferred his land holdings to his son, William. This move was an effort to prevent a foreclosure against the LeRoy Pope estate. Consequently, when LeRoy died in 1845, the lands were protected from that legal action. Among the principal debtors was Dr. Rene LaRoche, a noted Philadelphia physician, who married Mary Jane Percy, the sister of Thomas George Percy who married LeRoy's Pope's youngest daughter, Maria Pope.²

With the death of William H. Pope at his plantation in Washington County, Mississippi, near Greenville, on March 22, 1848,³ legal suits against the estate swiftly followed. The residence was purchased by Dr. Charles Hays Patton⁴ and the remaining property was divided into smaller segments of up to eleven acres that could be sold at public auction. In preparation for the latter sale, Elijah Hansborough, the Surveyor of the County and Justice of the Peace, prepared a plat of the Pope holdings. The original map was in Chancery Court records, but that volume disappeared some time during the early twentieth century. Fortunately, a duplicate of the original map of February 3, 1849, was discovered in Deed Book 114 of 1917.⁵

A second important document was a deed, dated February 5, 1849, in which LeRoy Pope Walker, as Administrator of the Pope estate and a nephew of Mr. Pope, the son of his sister, Matilda Pope Walker, transferred certain lands of the estate to William Robinson, Thomas S. McCalley, Thomas W. White and William J. McCalley. This document specified that because of a suit by Rene LaRoche and others against the Pope estate, Chancellor D. G. Lyons rendered a judgment that the Pope lands had to be sold at auction. This document identifies the Pope estate as "Poplar Grove Plantation."⁶

That the name should have been a surprise in 1995 may be attributed to the passage of time as well as the fact that another principal source for the name was simply forgotten, or, at best, misinterpreted.

With the purchase of the residence by Dr. Patton in 1848, no immediate members of the Pope family were henceforth connected to Huntsville except for the descendants of John William Walker and his wife, Matilda, the eldest Pope daughter. William H. Pope's wife, Frances Ann Erwin Pope, and her son, Erwin Pope, went to live with her father, Alexander Erwin at War Trace, Bedford County, Tennessee. Maria Pope Percy died in Nashville in 1847. (Her husband, Thomas George Percy died in 1841.) LeRoy Pope, Jr. was a resident of Memphis, Tennessee. Alexander Pope lived in Florence, Alabama, while Willis Pope resided in Columbus, Mississippi.

The new owner of "Poplar Grove" was Dr. Charles Hays Patton, a graduate of Yale University and the Pennsylvania Medical School. He was a surgeon during the Mexican War of 1848 and lived for a time in Texas. He was the son of William Patton, an early settler of Madison County, who with his friend Andrew Beirne, built the original Bell Factory near the Three Forks of Flint River on the Winchester Road in the County. Andrew Beirne's daughter, Susan Plunket Beirne, and Dr. Patton were married on September 12, 1833, uniting two powerful Huntsville families. Following William Patton's death in 1846 and that of Andrew Beirne, Dr. Patton and his wife became the major owners of Bell Factory which was the main source of their wealth.

With Dr. Patton's death in 1866, the residence was inherited by his eldest daughter, Mary Beirne Patton who married William Holding Echols V in 1859. Major Echols had entered West Point in 1854 and graduated 8th in his class in 1858. Following service in the Confederate Army, Major Echols became a civil engineer with the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, and with his wife's inheritance of Bell Factory stock, he served as Secretary-Treasurer and General Manager of the Company from 1869 until its closure in 1885. He then became President of the First National Bank, serving from 1899 to 1909.⁸

With the death of Major Echols in 1909 and his wife in 1924, the property passed to their only daughter, Susan Patton Echols who married Robert Elias Spragins in 1886. It is important to note that when the *Daily Mercury* reported their marriage in its December 29, 1886, issue, it was stated that the ceremony took place at the bride's home "on Reservoir Hill."⁹ This seems to indicate that "Echols Hill" was not a common term of identification. In 1924, in order to access the Spragins property to the east of the residence between McClung Avenue to the south and Eustis Avenue to the north, a new street called Echols Avenue was cut into the property. This may be the origin of "Echols Hill." Certainly in that year, "Poplar Grove" was an unknown term.

With the death of Susan Patton Echols Spragins in 1918 and her husband, Robert Elias Spragins in 1935, the residence was inherited by their only daughter, Susan Echols Spragins who married James Foster Watts in 1934. Their children were the last owners of the property until it was sold out of the family to Mr. And Mrs. Danny Wiginton in 1998. This ended 150 years of loving ownership of the Pope residence by the Patton-Echols-Spragins-Watts families.

The second source for the verification of "Poplar Grove" as the name of the LeRoy Pope residence comes from Anne Newport Royall. In 1818, Mrs. Royall came to Alabama from Virginia. She was to spend over four years in the Tennessee Valley, principally at Melton's Bluff, Florence, and Huntsville. In 1830, she published a series of letters she had written to her friend, Matt, an as-yet unidentified lawyer in Monroe County, Virginia. This volume, *Letters from Alabama*, contains among the earliest recorded descriptions of Huntsville and the men of eminence Ann Royall met, or in the case of LeRoy Pope, attempted to meet during her stay in north Alabama.

In the last letter of the volume, dated June 8, 1822, Mrs. Royall quotes a letter she had received from the elusive LeRoy Pope, apparently in response to her letter to him. That letter is headed by the words, "Poplar Grove, January 25th." Earlier efforts to discover where "Poplar Grove" was met with little success and some historians thought it to be a now non-existent small town. No one associated the name with the Pope residence.

But Mrs. Royall was determined to meet Col. Pope. That was to occur after July 1, 1823, as she prepared to return to Virginia to reclaim her inheritance when the courts overturned the will of her husband, Col. William Royall, and awarded the estate to other Royall descendants.

The opening chapter of Anne Royall's *Sketches of History, Life and Manners in the United States*, published in 1826, contains an important description of her visit to the Pope residence and also explains the name "Poplar Grove."

"After resting a few hours, I sallied out to refresh myself with a walk and meeting with Col. Pope, accepted an invitation to spend the night with him. Col. Pope is among the wealthiest men in the state of Alabama, and lives in princely style. If any man is to be envied on account of wealth, it is he. His house is separated from Huntsville by a deep ravine, and from an eminence overlooks the town from the west; on the east lies his beautiful plantation, on a level with his house. Although the ascent to it is considerable, yet when you are there, it is a perfect plane. He has, however, injured the beauty of his exterior, by surrounding it with Lombardy poplars. If I admired the exterior, I was amazed at the taste and elegance displayed in every part of

the interior, massy plate, cut glass, china ware, vases, sofas and mahogany furniture of the newest fashion, decorated the inside.

To those unacquainted with the wealth of this new country, the superb style of the inhabitants, generally, will appear incredible. Mrs. Pope is one of your plain, undisguised, house-keeping looking females; no ways elated by their vast possessions, which, I am told are the joint acquisition of her and her husband's industry. Report says, she is benevolent and charitable, and her looks confirm it. Next morning found me in one of my splenetic fits: I resolved to shake it off in the stage, and set off in it, accordingly, for the sweet springs.¹¹

With the preparation of the historic marker for the Pope mansion, it was appropriate to reintroduce the name LeRoy Pope bestowed upon this exquisite example of Federal and Greek Revival architecture. The great portico designed by George Steele for Dr. Patton in 1849 lends great dignity to the façade. The original builders are unknown. Perhaps it was the work of Thomas and William Brandon, the earliest builders in the city. It is fitting that the Wigintons have retained the original name of the house so that "Poplar Grove" continues to be one of the outstanding examples of early Alabama architecture.

ENDNOTES

¹Robey, Johnson, Jones and Roberts. *Maple Hill Cemetery, Phase One*. Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, 1995.

²Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *The House of Percy. Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family*. Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 98-99

³Gandrud, Pauline Jones, *Marriage, Death and Legal Notices from Early Alabama Newspapers, 1819-1893*. Southern Historical Press, 1981, p. 454.

⁴Dr. Charles Hays Patton was the son of William Patton and Martha Hays. His sister, Jane Ramsey Patton, first wife of William H. Pope, was born on April 29, 1810, and died January 31, 1832, with her infant son, Wyatt Pope. It should be noted that on the William Patton marker in Maple Hill Cemetery, Mrs. Patton is listed as Martha Hays. Dr. Patton's middle name is listed as Hayes on his tombstone. Robey, et al, *op. cit*, p 41, 115.

⁵Madison County Public Records, Office of the Probate Judge, Deed Book 114, pp. 636-640. In order to access the Pope property, two new streets were created: White Street adjacent to the Thomas W. White property on Maiden Lane (now Eustis Street) and a second street starting at the Section Line (now Wells Avenue) to accommodate the public cemetery

which the City Council had purchased from LeRoy Pope in 1822. This new street was called California Street, probably in recognition of the Gold Rush of 1849.

⁶Madison County Public Records, Office of the Probate Judge, Deed Book X, pp. 521-22.

⁷Gandrud, *op. cit.* See notices regarding Alexander Pope, p. 454; Willis Pope, p. 571; LeRoy Pope, Jr., p. 328; and the death of Maria Pope in Nashville, p. 490.

⁸Spragins, William Echols, et al. *A Brief History and Brief Genealogy of the Andrew Beirne, William Patton, William Echols V, and Robert E. Spragins Lines.* Privately printed, Huntsville, AL 1956. This volume is difficult to use without an index. Although there are often conflicting data, nevertheless, this remains an invaluable source for these families.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁰Royall, Anne Newport, *Letters from Alabama.* Washington D.C., pp. 161-165. This work was reprinted in 1969 by the University of Alabama Press as edited by Lucille Griffith.

¹¹Royall, Anne Newport, *Sketches, History, Life and Manners in the United States by a Traveller.* New Haven, printed by the author, 1826, pp. 1-3. Also see Jackson, George Stuyvesant, *Uncommon Scold. The Story of Anne Royall.* Boston, Bruce Humphries, Inc. Publishers, 1937. Anne remains one of the most elusive figures in early American journalism. An up-to-date biography is much needed to resolve the enigma created by this fascinating traveler.

AN EARLY MEETING

In browsing through old newspapers, one often comes across an item that reinforces the idea that over the years, some things do not change much. Below is an item that appeared in the *Huntsville Herald*, January 15, 1904:

HIGHLY INSTRUCTIVE Meeting of the Tennessee Valley Historical Society

Held at the City Hall this Morning—Valuable
Papers Read, Reports Made, Resolutions Offered

The second annual session of the Tennessee Valley Historical Society was held at the city hall this morning at 10:30 o'clock. Judge R. W. Walker, the president, was present but was called away by business engagements. Mr. R. E. Pettus was called to the chair and presided.

The roll was called and the minutes of the last meeting were read and accepted. The reports of the secretary and treasurer were read and ordered printed. Great interest was shown in the proceedings and it was unanimously agreed to have all reports and proceedings filed.

Hon. Thomas M. Owen of the Department of Archives and History read an interesting paper on "Notes on the Settlement and History of Lawrence County" which was given close attention. Hon. O.D. Street then followed with a splendid paper entitled "A Narrative of the Establishment by the Legislature of Georgia, in 1784 of a County in the Great Bend of the Tennessee River," which contained much valuable information on history of the early settlement of this country.

The secretary then announced the following papers by title, the finished papers to be handed in later:

"Recollections of Roddys Command" by Col. Josiah Patterson, of Memphis.

"Talucah Cave in Morgan County" by Mrs. Roy Nelson of Decatur.

"Reminiscence of Madison County Prior to the Civil War" by Hon. Sutton S. Scott, of Auburn.

"Some Landmarks of Huntsville" by R. C. Brickell of Huntsville.

Hon. Thomas M. Owen then presented some interesting documents of Morgan county of 1818 for incorporation in the printed proceedings.

An informal discussion of general subjects of interest was entered into which proved exceedingly interesting, many facts being brought out.

Officers for the year were then elected as follows: Judge R. W. Walker, president; Hon. O.D. Street secretary and treasurer; Vice-Presidents R. E. Pettus, R. C. Brickell, Jesse E. Brown, T. R. Routhac, W. C. Rayburn, W. T. Sanders, W. E. Skeggs, J. C. Kuanne.

Resolutions upon the death of Gen. J. B. Gordon who was an honorary member of this society and a former Alabamian, and Hon. W. I. Bullock, the vice president of the society in Franklin county, who died yesterday, were ordered prepared.

Hon. Ben P. Hunt and Bruce Armstrong were elected to membership.

The meeting was most highly instructive and entertaining and it is to be regretted that more of our people did not attend.

Mr. Street made a brief talk and told of the great work Mr. Owen was doing in his department and urged citizens to assist him in every way possible.

The meeting then adjourned.

MARKER COMMITTEE PUBLISHES NEW BOOK FEATURING 79
HISTORICAL MARKERS IN MADISON COUNTY

By

F. Alex Luttrell, III

Many events have transpired since the previous marker update in an earlier issue of the *Review*. During the past two years, committee members have worked diligently toward accomplishing each of the committee's primary objectives: 1) identify historical sites, perform research, write text, and erect Alabama Historical Association markers throughout Madison County; 2) refurbish existing historical markers; and 3) compile a book of all historical markers. This third objective was finally accomplished with the publication of *Historical Markers of Madison County, Alabama*. Initiated in 1995, this book features all 61 of the historical markers erected by our society plus 18 additional ones erected by other organizations. It contains a full-cover cover, 178 pages and 214 photographs, an introduction and brief history of the area, the text of all markers, maps to locate each marker, a bibliography, and complete index. The book arrived in time for the Alabama Historical Association's Annual Meeting in Huntsville on April 19-21. The society also held a special reception and book premier on April 22 at the Church of the Nativity. Trustees of the Doris Burwell Foundation were on hand to present a check to the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society to finance the publication of 1000 copies of the book. The trustees were thanked for their generous gift and presented with the first copies of the book. Books are now available through the society and at a number of local stores: Shaver's Bookstore, Fleming Books, Lawren's, Harrison Brothers Hardware, Books-A-Million (University & Parkway), the Huntsville Museum of Art, Burritt on the Mountain, the Historic Huntsville Depot, and Alabama Constitution Village.

After noticing that many of our existing markers were in need of a facelift, the Marker Committee voted to encourage sponsoring organizations to assist in this project. The Alabama Historical Association also agreed to help with some of the refurbishment expenses. The First United Methodist Church agreed to finance the refurbishment of their marker. This was accomplished in 2000, and the congregation held a rededication ceremony on June 25, 2000, to unveil their marker. The Marker Committee also designated a portion of the city-appropriated funds to be used toward refurbishing some of the older, faded markers and replacing some of the damaged posts. Posts were replaced at Ditto's Landing and at the Twickenham Historic District marker at the intersection of California and White Streets. The City of Huntsville marker, Indian Creek Canal marker, Burritt Museum marker, and Saint Bartley's Primitive Baptist Church marker were returned to the manufacturer and completely refurbished. These arrived in Huntsville and were erected just prior to the Annual Meeting of the Alabama Historical Association.

Thanks to funding provided by the City of Huntsville, the Madison County Commission, and other organizations and individuals, great strides have also been made in erecting new markers. The five most recent markers to be dedicated include the Tallulah Bankhead / I. Schiffman Building marker, the Weeden House marker, the Temple B'nai Sholom marker, the Goldsmith-Schiffman Field marker, and the Episcopal Church of the Nativity marker. A marker for the Huntsville Slave Cemetery was also completed during this time period, but has not yet been erected. The future promises to be busy as well. The Marker Committee is currently reviewing text for markers to be located at Councill Training School, Vienna/New Hope, Central Presbyterian Church, and the Big Spring. Members are also performing research for a future marker in the Monrovia/Blue Springs area. An account of each of the recent dedication ceremonies, along with the text of each marker follows.

A crowd of nearly one-hundred people was on hand to witness the unveiling and dedication of the Tallulah Bankhead / I. Schiffman Building marker at 3:00 pm on Sunday, April 18, 1999. The ceremony and reception were held at the I. Schiffman Building (231 East Side Square), and were sponsored by the Tallulah Bankhead Society and Mrs. Margaret Anne Goldsmith Hanaw, owner of the building. Mr. David Robb, Treasurer of the Tallulah Bankhead Society, welcomed the guests. Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs, Temple B'nai Sholom, gave an invocation which was followed by a Scripture reading by the Rev. Kerry Holder, Episcopal Church of the Nativity. Mayor Loretta Spencer greeted the assembly and spoke several minutes regarding the city's commitment to preserving our rich history. Mr. Robb and Mrs. Hanaw introduced all of the invited guests which included representatives from the governor's office, state legislators, and city and county officials. They noted that the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs provided a grant to fabricate this marker. The City of Huntsville was also recognized for erecting the marker. Following the introductions, Mr. Robb reviewed Tallulah Bankhead's distinguished career, and Mrs. Hanaw gave a history of the building in which Tallulah was born. The marker was then unveiled by Mrs. Hanaw and Ms. Catie Grant, a descendent of the Bankhead family. On hand to accept the marker for the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society was Mr. Alex Luttrell, Chairman of the Marker Committee. Mrs. Joyce Smith, Vice-President of the Alabama Historical Association, accepted the marker for that organization. The ceremony concluded with Mrs. Elaine Hubbard singing Tallulah Bankhead's signature song, "May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You."



I. Schiffman Building



David Robb, Tallulah Bankhead Society Treasurer, and Margaret Anne Goldsmith Hanaw, great-granddaughter of Isaac Schiffman

The next marker to be dedicated was the Howard Weeden Home marker. This project, initiated in 1973, hit numerous roadblocks prior to its completion. The marker was finally ordered in 1978, and when the marker arrived in Huntsville, it was discovered there were two errors in the text: a misspelled name and an incorrect birth date. For nearly twenty years the marker lay in a county warehouse. The marker was rediscovered by Mr. Winston E. Walker, III, in 1995 when the Marker Committee undertook a survey of all historical markers in Madison County. One year later, the errors were corrected, and the marker was finally erected. Several additional years passed before scheduling the unveiling and dedication ceremony for Sunday, June 27, 1999. The ceremony, sponsored by the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association, took place at the museum immediately following the Annual Meeting of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. Dr. William G. Cockrill, Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, opened the ceremony with an invocation. Mrs. Nan Hall, a representative of the Weeden House Committee, welcomed those in attendance. A brief history of the home and museum was then given by Mrs. Martha Simms Rambo, another Weeden House Committee member. Mrs. Missy Ming Smith, Community Relations Director for the Madison County Commission, was on hand to unveil and present the marker. The Madison County Commission provided the funds to manufacture the marker. Mr. Alex Luttrell and Mrs. Joyce Smith accepted the marker on behalf of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and the Alabama Historical Association, respectively. Mrs. Hall then invited attendees to join the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association at their Annual Meeting and Ice Cream Social immediately following the benediction by Dr. Cockrill.



Howard Weeden Home

Congregants of B'nai Sholom chose the Centennial Celebration of the Dedication of Temple B'nai Sholom at 7:30 pm on Friday, November 12, 1999, as an opportunity to officially unveil and dedicate their new historical marker. Following the historic Shabbat Service led by Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs, Mrs. Margaret Anne Goldsmith Hanaw gave a history of Huntsville's Jewish Community, the Congregation, and Temple B'nai Sholom. Dr. Martin Davis, Professor of Architecture at Clemson University, spoke about the architecture of the Temple and its designer, Mr. R.H. Hunt. Mr. Scott Averbuch, President of Temple B'nai Sholom, then introduced Mayor Loretta Spencer and thanked her and the city council for providing the funds for the marker and supplying the labor to erect the marker. Mr. Averbuch then presented the marker to Mrs. Raneé Pruitt, Vice-President of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. She accepted the marker for the local historical society and then presented it to Mrs. Joyce Smith, President of the Alabama Historical Association, who also accepted it. The ceremony concluded with a prayer by Rabbi Jacobs.



Temple B'nai Sholom

On Friday, October 27, 2000, the Goldsmith-Schiffman Field marker was officially unveiled. The dedication ceremony, sponsored by the Huntsville City Schools and Ms. Margaret Anne Goldsmith, took place at 6:30 pm during pre-game festivities for Huntsville High's game against Sparkman High. Mr. James E. Taylor, Captain of the 1938 Huntsville High School Football Team, served as master of ceremonies for the event. He noted the field was dedicated during the area's first night football game on October 4, 1934. Mr. Taylor then introduced several of the players who participated in that game. Those present included: Mr. Ernest Bailey, Mr. Ed Mitchell, and Mr. Hershel Bingham. Ms. Goldsmith, great-granddaughter of the two women for whom the field is named, discussed the history of the field. She then presented the marker to Mr. Alex Luttrell, who accepted it on behalf of both the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and the Alabama Historical Association. He thanked the Huntsville City School System for paying for and installing the marker. Those in attendance then enjoyed seeing Huntsville and Sparkman play a spirited game of football.



Ernest Bailey, Margaret Anne Goldsmith, Jimmie Taylor, Ed Mitchell,
Hershel Bingham, and Alex Luttrell

The most recent marker dedication occurred at the Episcopal Church of the Nativity on Sunday, April 22, 2001, immediately following the congregation's 11:00 am worship service. Rev. Roderic L. Murray, III, Rector, welcomed the congregation and other guests assembled at the marker site. He recognized Mr. George M. Mahoney, Jr. for his efforts as the congregation's liaison to the Marker Committee. Father Murray also introduced Dr. Don Allan Wheeler, Senior Warden of the Church of the Nativity, who unveiled the marker. Father Murray then presented the marker to the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, represented by Mr. Alex Luttrell. Mr. Luttrell thanked the City of Huntsville for providing the funds for the marker, and he recognized Mr. Mike Mahone for ensuring the marker was erected in time for the ceremony. Mr. Luttrell noted that Mr. Mahone's crew encountered several problems with the marker and post, but they were able to install it just two days prior to the ceremony. Mr. Luttrell then presented the marker to Mr. Wayne Smith, Executive Board Member of the Alabama Historical Association. Rev. Jack F. Wilson, Associate Rector, gave the benediction. All attendees were invited to attend a reception in the church's Ridley Hall. It was noted that copies of the new marker book would be available for sale at that time.



Rev. Roderic L. Murray, III, Dr. Don Allan Wheeler, Alex Luttrell, and Wayne Smith

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
1902-1968
Alabama's Best-Known Actress

Tallulah Bankhead was the toast of the London theatre in the 1920's, and nationally renowned for her dramatic roles in "The Little Foxes" (1939), "The Skin of Our Teeth" (1942), the movie "Lifeboat" (1944), and as emcee of "The Big Show" (NBC Radio, 1950-52). She was born in Huntsville on January 31, 1902, in an apartment of the I. Schiffman Building (see other side). Her father, then Huntsville City Attorney, was later Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. A ravishing beauty in her youth, Tallulah was known for her uninhibited exuberance, deep sultry voice, and for calling everyone "Dahling." She appeared in 56 plays, 19 movies, and scores of radio and television productions during her 50-year career. She is buried in the churchyard of St. Paul's, Kent County, Maryland.

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 1999

I. SCHIFFMAN BUILDING
Birthplace of Tallulah Bankhead

This was the original site for a building erected by John Brahan before 1817 and known as No. 1 & No. 2 Cheapside. Erected circa 1845, the present structure is the surviving south third of a Federal-style building. In 1895, the Southern Savings and Loan Association acquired the property, and commissioned Architect George W. Thompson of Nashville, Tennessee to transform the building into Huntsville's only surviving example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture. Isaac Schiffman purchased the property in 1905. His family's businesses have continued here since that date. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 1999

HOWARD WEEDEN HOME

Built 1819 by H. C. Bradford, this home was later owned by John Read, John McKinley, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court (1837-1852), Bartley M. Lowe, M. C. Betts and Maria Howard Weeden (1846-1905) whose poetry and paintings preserve nineteenth century Southern Culture.

Marker by D.A.R. 1910; H.A.B.S. 1935
National Register of Historic Places, 1973

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
1978

TEMPLE B'NAI SHOLOM

Huntsville's first Jewish citizens arrived during the 1840's. Congregation B'nai Sholom ("Sons of Peace") was founded July 30, 1876 by 32 families.

They affiliated in 1877 with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform Movement. Construction of the Temple began in 1898, and it was dedicated on November 26, 1899. Chairman of the Building Committee was Isaac Schiffman. Architecture is primarily of the Romanesque Revival style, with influences of the Renaissance Revival in the west front gable. The Temple was designed by architect R.H. Hunt of Chattanooga. Extensive restoration was completed in 1994. Temple B'nai Sholom is the oldest synagogue in Alabama in continuous use.

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 1997

GOLDSMITH-SCHIFFMAN
FIELD

On January 25, 1934, Oscar Goldsmith, Lawrence
B. Goldsmith,
Annie Schiffman Goldsmith, Robert L.
Schiffman, and Elsie
Strauss Schiffman gave this property to the City
of Huntsville
for an athletic field. The gift was in memory of
Betty Bernstein
Goldsmith (wife of Oscar and mother of
Lawrence) and Betty
Herstein Schiffman (wife of Isaac and mother of
the other
donors). The Civil Works Administration
provided \$6500 in
materials and labor to construct the field, the first
in Huntsville
to accommodate night athletic games. The Acme
Club raised
funds for lighting through season ticket sales.
Dedication
exercises were held during the first night game on
October 4,
1934, when 1000 fans saw Coach Milton Frank's
Huntsville High
team defeat Gadsden High.

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
1999

THE CHURCH OF THE
NATIVITY, EPISCOPAL

The Church of the Nativity congregation was organized December 17, 1842 – the name chosen because of the approaching Christmas season. The Convention of the Diocese of Alabama, Protestant Episcopal Church, approved the congregation on February 16, 1843. The original brick church, erected in 1847, stood east of the present structure. The present church building, an outstanding example of Gothic Revival architecture, was designed by Frank Wills and Henry Dudley of New York. Erected at a cost of \$37,500, it was dedicated Easter Eve, April 13, 1859, and consecrated January 29, 1860.

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK - 1990

(continued on other side)

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
2001

THE CHURCH OF THE
NATIVITY, EPISCOPAL

(continued from other side)

Bibb Chapel was consecrated in 1886 as a
memorial to
Wilson Carey Bibb. Ridley Hall, for parish
functions,
was completed in 1953 as a memorial to Dr.
James L.
Ridley. Joffrion Hall, dedicated in 1983 as an
educational building, was named for the Rev. A.
Emile
Joffrion, ninth rector.
For 150 years, Nativity was served by only ten
rectors,
two of whom became bishops. The Rev. Henry C.
Lay,
second rector, was consecrated Missionary Bishop
of the
Southwest (1859). The Rev. Randolph R.
Claiborne, Jr.,
seventh rector, was consecrated Suffragan Bishop,
Diocese
of Alabama (1949) and became Bishop of Atlanta
(1953).

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
2001

MEDARIS
PRIVATE – GENERAL – PRIEST

By
Lee James

There is no doubt in my mind that the impact which General John Bruce Medaris had on Huntsville, on the Army missile program, and on the U.S. space program exceeded the impact made by any other military officer. To many he was an enigma, to others a genius, and to still others, a love-hate type of person. In my opinion, lumping all of the above together, he liked it that way.

He rose from a simple background to be a great achiever in the 1950s. He grew up in a divorced family, having only his mother, and living without much money. He had a newspaper route, became the Springfield, Ohio, lamplighter by bidding on it as a boy, worked at night in a mailroom, drove a taxi, and then became a streetcar conductor. It is not surprising that in 1918, at the age of sixteen (passing as eighteen) he joined the Marine Corps. His life of hard knocks served him well, and his career progressed until he became an Ordnance Officer. His success in the Korean War in solving the ammunition problem caused him to be promoted to Brigadier General. He had a valued assistant in Korea named John Zierdt. After the war, with Redstone Arsenal as part of his Ammunition Command, he began to shift his interest to rockets and missiles.

On 1 February 1956 General Medaris was named Commanding General of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency with duty station at Redstone Arsenal. He was given broad authority, more than had been given to such a command before. Medaris was a forceful man, with great energy, and great foresight. He was very demanding—both up and down the organizational chart. He demanded, and got, his choice of people, the highest procurement priorities, and the money, airplanes, vehicles, supplies, buildings, and anything else he needed. He introduced a new approach, getting senior officers from all the other branches, such as Signal Corps, Corp of Engineers, Transportation Corps, Quartermaster, etc. This greatly simplified the demands he placed on them. In short, by all of these steps, he grew the work force at Redstone Arsenal from 13,000 to 25,000 in a very short time. He also helped get housing on the Arsenal for military and off the Arsenal for civilians.

To put this writing into perspective, I was assigned to the Control Office of ABMA. I worked for General Zierdt (then Colonel Zierdt). I also worked closely with the well known Colonel Nickerson. The Control Office was Medaris's look down into the organization and his window to the outside world. I had a number of bright young captains who worked closely with the von Braun organization. Medaris, through them, wanted to know everything von Braun was doing and even what he was thinking of doing. It is an interesting note that almost all of these captains became general officers.

One of my major duties was to go to the Pentagon each month with General Medaris to be the briefing officer on the Jupiter program, briefing the Secretaries of the Army and Navy. The Navy briefing was on the Polaris. This was a very intense rivalry because it had already been announced that only one of these two missiles would go into development. It was of course always interesting to watch the sparring back and forth in a contest at this level and to note their tactics.

Medaris faced several problems at Redstone. After the big build-up of personnel, he needed to have a multi-disciplined group that worked well together. He felt the biggest challenge was the von Braun group. The next biggest task was the race against the Russians to put up the first satellite. It was agreed that Medaris had the hardware and the ability, but the Navy had the backing—initially. After the Vanguard failed, Medaris took great pride in the first U.S. satellite.

The next big battle was with the Navy over who would get to develop an intermediate range ballistic missile. There could be only one. ABMA didn't really win that one, but it got them into the next big fight, with the Air Force—Jupiter or Thor. Once again, we lost. In my opinion it is not who has the best argument, it is whose politics are better. The Army never seemed to be very good at that.

From here, the road was down hill for Medaris. Space was coming into its own. The order by President Eisenhower to create a separate space agency, NASA, created problems over which Medaris agonized. If the space race was going to get off the ground, and if his team was to have any part in it, he had to give up the von Braun group to NASA. On the other hand, if he gave up the von Braun group, ABMA was essentially dead. In spite of vigorous support from Medaris's close friend, Secretary of the Army Brucker, funding and other support from the top went to the other services. There is no question that a record of successes seemed to make little difference in the decision-making process.

While these decisions were being made, everyone was becoming aware that we had no space vehicle big enough to challenge the Russian program. Also, earth orbit probes were needed. The only real capability for these things were with the team under Medaris. Pending a NASA decision, his team went to work on the big booster and the earth orbit probes. If this work had not been done at this time, President Kennedy's commitment to a timetable for landing a man on the moon could not have been met. After much agonizing, Medaris supported the transfer of the 4000-strong von Braun group to NASA. This resulted in the demise of Medaris's major organizational arm, ABMA. Medaris had ridden roughshod over many Pentagon organizations. He had no real future anywhere except at Redstone Arsenal. At this point, the man who had done so much for Huntsville and Redstone Arsenal, retired. Things would never be quite the same.

I have little first hand knowledge of Medaris after his retirement. He moved to Florida and became president of the Lionel Train Company. After that, he was involved in real estate around Disney World. Then he had a serious bout with

cancer, and after winning the cancer fight which he attributed to help from God, he became a priest. With his usual vigor, he rose to Bishop of the Southeast with the Anglican Church. He retired to North Carolina where he died in 1990 at the age of 88. He had very recently been honored by the National Space Club and the Smithsonian Institution. He, of course, had already received many other honors.

I would like to conclude these comments with some very scattered personal incidents. My life with Medaris started when I was commander of a NIKE battalion in Baltimore. I had orders to go to West Point when I received a call from the Artillery Branch saying, "Sorry, but someone named Medaris has just gotten your orders changed to some place in Alabama." Later, in my briefings in Washington, I had occasion to observe Medaris. Two things struck me—his decisiveness and the complete confidence that Secretary Brucker had in him. He deserved a lot of respect.

Medaris felt as strongly about his golf as his work. He built the first golf course on Redstone Arsenal, and when it was opened by him, he held up play while he changed the par four third hole to a par five. It turned out that after hitting two good shots, he hadn't reached the green. Once when I was playing as his opponent, and I stopped to count up what I had shot on a hole, he promptly told me what I had shot.

I always found it interesting in meetings with Medaris and von Braun. Medaris was a good technical man, and it was apparent that he hated to take a back seat to von Braun in missile design and problems. He used the young captains in an effort to keep up with the laboratories. If the subject was not too technical, Medaris let everyone know who was running the meeting.

I can recall three interesting encounters with Medaris after he moved to Florida. In the first he visited Huntsville and invited me to lunch at the Officers Club. He told me he had cancer and was totally convinced he would die. He even told me goodbye. He was later treated in Texas and cured. The next time he visited Huntsville and invited me to lunch, he was a priest and wore the appropriate garb. It was funny, but he still sounded like a general. He was convinced that God had cured him because He had work for him to do. The third occasion was for a meeting of the "old timers." I was asked to call him in North Carolina and invite him to come and give the invocation. He paused and in typical fashion said, "Is that all you want me to do, not make a speech?" I told him I was sorry but we had a speaker. Well, he came and gave the invocation and it was quite a speech.

There will only be one Medaris. Love him or hate him – agree with him or disagree -- no one else could have done the job he did.



NOTES

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
P. O. Box 666
Huntsville, AL 35804

Membership Application 2001-20021

Name _____

Address _____

Telephones: Home _____ Work _____

Annual Dues: Individual: \$10.00 Family: \$18.00

My check for \$ _____ payable to Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society includes a subscription to *The Huntsville Historical Review* and all the Society's activities.

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.

The Huntsville Historical Review is sent to all current members of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. Annual membership is \$10.00 for an individual and \$18.00 for a family. Libraries and organizations may receive the *Review* on a subscription basis for \$10.00 per year. Single issues may be obtained for \$5.00 each.

Responsibility for statements of facts or opinions made by contributors to the *Review* is not assumed by either the Publications Committee or the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. Questions or comments concerning articles in this journal should be directed to the Editor, P. O. Box 666, Huntsville, Alabama 35804.

Permission to reprint any article in whole or in part is granted, provided credit is given to the *Review*.



50th Anniversary

1951 ||| 2001

P.O. Box 666
Huntsville, AL 35804



NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
HUNTSVILLE, AL
PERMIT NO. 4