

Jefferson County Historical Association

THE JEFFERSON JOURNAL



No. 4

Reflections on Jefferson County History October-December, 2022



UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Thursday, July 28, 2022

Member Meeting
6:30 pm

O'Neal Library
Mountain Brook, AL
Kari Frederickson
Professor of History
University of Alabama

OUR MISSION:

To Preserve and Remember

Contact JCHA

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Birmingham's First Physicians

(Excerpted from Early Days In Birmingham)

By Mrs. Florence Earle Jordan

Mrs. Florence Earle Jordan was the daughter of William Mudd, of Elyton. In 1868 she married Dr. Mortimer Harvie Jordan, and in 1873 they moved to Birmingham where Dr. Jordan became one of the city's best-known doctors. He contributed many articles to the literature of the medical profession, particularly a treatise on the cholera epidemic which has become part of the government records.

Dr. Fonville came to Birmingham previous to the year of 1873, and gave great service to the sufferers at the time. I remember hearing his name often mentioned as one of those who labored to relieve the cholera victims, but that is the extent of my knowledge of him.

Dr. John W. Sears was born at Sanly Hood, Virginia, in 1830. He served in the Confederate Army and organized a hospital in Warrenton, Virginia. In the year 1867 he came to Jefferson County and located at what is now Roebuck Springs, boarded with Mr. James Wilson. In 1871 he moved to

Birmingham. He soon had a large practice and many friends. He was quiet, unobtrusive, kind and loveable man, and a devout member of the Methodist Church. He escaped an attack of the cholera, but labored with true devotion and zeal during that trying time among the sick.

He lived for many years afterwards and passed away in 1896, beloved and lamented by all.

Dr. William P. Taylor came to Birmingham from Montgomery in the early days of 1872 when the city was but a few months old. He was a man of great culture and polished manners, and with medical attainments, which soon won for him a lucrative practice and friend among every class of people.

He was among those who remained at their post during the epidemic of cholera, which in 1873 devastated our town. He fell victim to the disease himself but after recovering began again his labors.

He lived and worked among us until 1883, when he passed away at the age



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Message from the President



Martin Clapp

Greetings!

At our April Membership meeting, you elected a new slate of officers to serve your Association in 2022. Harry Bradford will remain as Treasurer, Michael Rediker will replace Randall Pitts as Vice President, and I am honored to succeed Dan Puckett as President. Jim Hard has stepped down as Secretary and we are looking to fill that position soon. Many thanks to Dan, Randall, and Jim for their long-standing service to this wonderful organization!

We are also pleased to announce three new members to our Board. These are Kris Elliott, Mims Cooper, and Ross Askins. All three are excited to be involved and look forward to being active and engaged directors.

Speaking of our meetings, our April meeting was our first in-person gathering in quite a while. Based on the strong attendance it is obvious that many of us have missed getting together and are eager to be back! Thanks to our own Mrs. Cathy Adams for a fantastic presentation on Birmingham during the 1919 flu epidemic.

Our next meeting is Thursday, July the 28th at the O'Neal Library. Please mark this on your calendars, and I would like to encourage you to bring a friend or two! Our organization has a lot to offer and all of you are our best advertisement. I look forward to seeing you then.

Warm regards,
Martin Clapp
President



of 50 years.

Dr. James B. Luckie came to this place while it was yet in its infancy from Montgomery. He brought with him a reputation as physician and surgeon of rare ability. He served during the Civil War as surgeon and for a time was with the Forty-third Alabama Regiment. He was full of fun and humor, a loyal friend and a good physician, whose friends were legion and whose enemies none.

He gave great service during the cholera, working night and day without thought or care for himself, until at the close of the epidemic he was himself a victim, but fortunately after being near death he recovered and after a long and useful life, he passed away on December 4, 1908, at the age of 75.

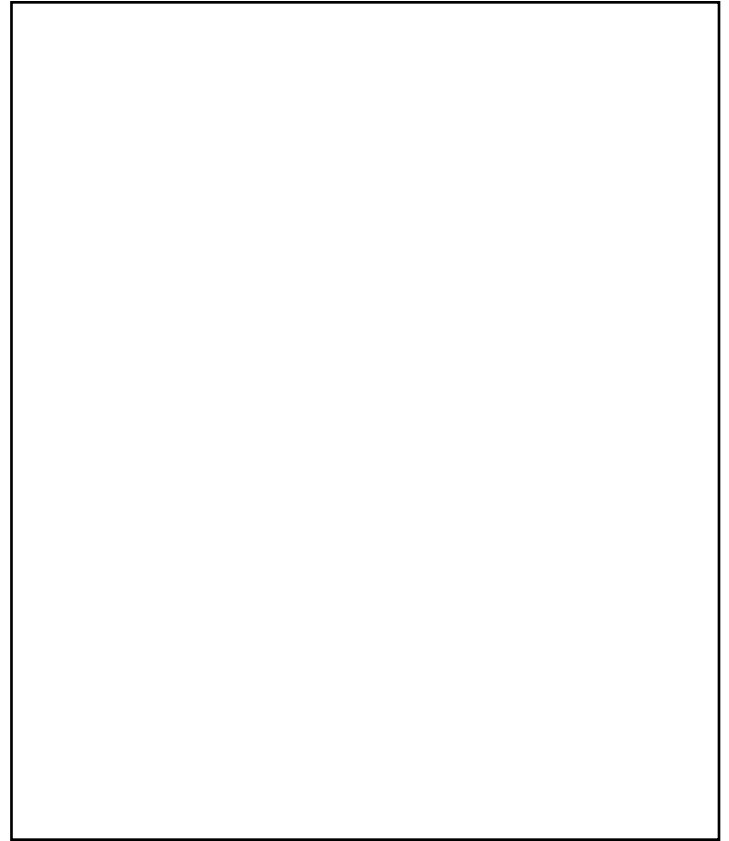
Dr. Crawford was another faithful and devoted doctor who gave his services night and day without money and without price. He came to this place in 1871 from Tuskegee, and lived here until about 1876, when he returned to Tuskegee and died in 1883.

I wish I knew more of the life and works of this good and able man, who was such a good friend of my husband, but as he left here early in his career, I never met him again.

Dr. Mortimer Harvie Jordan first settled in Elyton, and practiced medicine until on July 4, 1872, he moved to Birmingham. He was a young man of great energy and ambition; of a genial happy disposition, devoted to his profession, in which he was even then though only 28 years of age, rapidly forging to the front ranks. He had served with distinction during the Civil War rapidly rising from private to the rank of captain.

He remained during the dark days of the summer of 1873, working day and night over the cholera-stricken people, scarcely pausing for sleep or rest. He fortunately escaped having the disease himself, but lived until 1889 when he succumbed to that dreaded disease, tuberculosis, and passed away at the early age of forty-four years, leaving a large family and many friends to mourn his loss.

It may not be amiss here to mention that in the year of 1874, Dr. Jordan was called on by the Government to furnish a history of the Cholera in Birmingham, which he did. It was published, and is now in the Congressional Records.



Hillman Hospital Research Lab.



This is the earliest known photograph of Birmingham, AL. It was taken in 1873, just 8 years after the Civil War had ended. The street is 5th Avenue North. The Redmont Hotel was built on this property.

Reba Williams Revitalizing Birmingham's Titusville Branch Library

By Tom Badham

In 1956, the Birmingham city government decided to build a second “Negro Branch Library” in the southwest Birmingham neighborhood called Titusville. The library building was to be located on Avenue “F” (Sixth Avenue, South) at Center Street. It would join the first “Negro Branch Library” located in Smithfield which was nearing completion. In the November 11, 1957, Birmingham Post-Herald an article headlined “Branch Library for Negroes OK’d” showed the architects’ drawing of the soon to be completed building.

Before then blacks went downtown to the African-American Masonic Temple at the north-west corner of 16th Street and 4th Avenue North, where a “colored library” was on the top floor.

By 1990, the Titusville library’s building was showing its age. The flat roof, as flat roofs are prone to do, began to develop serious leaks. It left puddles of water on the floor with water, mildew and black mold damage on the books and in the walls. The ever-increasing repair and maintenance costs pointed the way to a new library building.

In 1992, construction began on the new library building which was almost twice as large as the old one. It has a

large meeting room which can hold seventy-five as well as a smaller conference room and two “typing rooms”. The building is approximately 8,100 square feet in size. Today, thirty years on, the library building looks to be in good condition with the interior well cared for.

There is an old humorous saying that librarians are secret masters of the universe because they know where all the knowledge is. Ms. Reba Williams, the recently appointed Titusville Branch Librarian, has dedicated herself and the library to serving all members of the Titusville Community with no prejudice towards any group or individual. Instead of just offering books to the public, Ms. Williams actively works to get anyone information or help that they need.

Not just, “This where you go and this is what you need to do.”, but “We will find out who you need to see or call and actively help you get the assistance you need.” In making the library a welcoming safe place for the entire community, her goals include basic assistance in finding food, shelter or medical care, for anyone who comes through her doors. She encourages the Titusville community to think of the library as pro-active community resource that should be utilized by everyone in the community.

This includes such programs as holding GED classes in

the library for those who had to drop out of school or who need tutoring in basic reading and writing. Also, classes for non-English speakers who wish to learn to speak, read and write English and to get settled in the area. If someone arrives who hasn't any money for food, she will get them some food. Her mission is to both help her community and spread the word that a library is the place you should come to find help. Because librarians are trained to seek out and dispense knowledge, information and help. If help can be found, they'll find it.

Many people and groups in her community, for whatever reasons, never thought of the library as a welcoming place that could be a refuge for them. Ms. Williams is trying to change that stereotype.



How Bessemer Came To Be

By Tom Badham

In the 1880's the Birmingham-Jefferson County "Iron Boom" was going full blast with nineteen furnaces established in the district during the decade. In March of 1886, Henry DeBardeleben decided that he wanted to build a company town near his holdings in western Jefferson County. For his grand plans, he needed investors to help him with the finances involved. He carefully chose seven men who had the funds to risk in this investment. He approached John Adger, Robert Adger, Andrew N. Adger, Moses E. Lopez, James B. Murdock, David Roberts and Augustine T. Smythe with his plans.

He proposed they buy 4,040 acres of land in the vicinity of DeBardeleben Coal and Iron Company holdings and there build an industrial town "solid from the bottom." What was then relatively cheap farm land would eventually become tremendously more valuable, but it would take time and expensive effort to make that transformation. This wasn't going to be an overnight "get rich quick" scheme.

DeBardeleben wanted his city to compliment Birmingham similar to Brooklyn complimenting New York City with Brooklyn being New York's industrial partner, but a separate city under its own control. He originally thought about naming his new city "Brooklyn", but later decided to name it after Sir Henry Bessemer, inventor of the blast furnace steel process.

On July 28, 1886, DeBardeleben and his seven investors formally met to begin their endeavor. To handle all the myriad of details involved they designed a company originally to be called the Bessemer Land Company, but later a more sweeping title was used. On January 8, 1887, the Bessemer Land and Improvement Company was incorporated.

The following day they sold 25,000 common stock shares in the company, payable in lands, to 22 investors at \$100 a share raising two and a half million dollars. The stockholders voted to bank 20 per cent of each individual's stock in a treasury of 5,000 shares. This stock was to be used to induce industry to come into Bessemer by four methods:

Giving industry a cash bonus or stock in the company.

Donating lands to prospective industry (Industrial plant sites).

Making cash loans.

Making a combination of the above three methods.

The offer of free plant site acreage was the big enticement with some help paying expenses in getting set up with all the details such as improving drainage, sewerage, rail and road access. The estimated value of the new industry to Bessemer determined the amount of help given to the prospective industry. While the cash loan inducement was there, the company used it as sparingly as possible. Land they had, money—not so much.

DeBardeleben was elected the first company president and chairman of the Board of Directors. He brought in what became the Bessemer Rolling Mills to service his Bessemer Blast Furnace #1. The Bessemer Company purchased capital stock of the Jefferson Fertilizer Company and the Bessemer Galvanizing Works to encourage them to build plants in Bessemer. At the same time, DeBardeleben needed housing and other amenities immediately on site for his town to be. When time is of the essence, it's nice to have a fortune.

The New Orleans World Fair was ending and the fair's buildings were up for sale to be disposed of. DeBardeleben caught the train to New Orleans, bought two of the biggest buildings, had them disassembled, loaded on L&N railroad cars and transported to Bessemer. Those buildings became the Montezuma Hotel and the Jamaica Building.

DeBardeleben planned to develop Bessemer by building coke ovens, blast furnaces and then steel works. He also bought through the Bessemer Company, the Belle Ellen coal mine and other coal mining properties in the Blockton mining district.

He was urged by Henry Badham to immediately begin building a steel works and become a buyer of the surplus pig iron which was already being manufactured in Bessemer and not add to that surplus by building additional blast furnaces. If that has been accomplished, Bessemer might have thrived and developed as Ensley did. But the immense costs of building a modern steel plant was far beyond the financial capabilities of the Bessemer

Company.

DeBardeleben built the Little Belle Blast Furnace which was designed to use either coke or charcoal. Two other coke furnaces were erected at Robertstown. One of the first companies induced to locate in his new town was the Bessemer Firebrick Company which later became Alabama Clay Products Company and is now Laclede Christy Clay Products Company. Other recipients of the Town Company's industrial assistance through the early years included Bessemer Manufacturing Company, Bessemer Dummy Line, Bessemer Ice Company, and Beggs Foundry.

As of 1890, the company had granted industries 163 acres of land, 3,335 shares of stock, and \$100,000 in cash loans.

Though DeBardeleben always seemed to land on his feet, some of his hunches didn't pay off. Busts in which he involved the company and its resources included a proposed railroad from Bessemer into Murphree's Valley and an ill-fated move to relocate DeKalb and Bay State Furnaces at Fort Payne to Bessemer. The Belle Ellen coal mine investment bubble collapse caused DeBardeleben to resign as president of the Bessemer Land and Improvement Company.

Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI) made several attempts to cash in on the Bessemer bonanza – and the town company did nothing to stop them. TCI built a couple of blast furnaces at Bessemer, but later decided to move its operations to Ensley and dismantled the furnaces.

Having weathered the 1893 Panic (a semi-depression) and the Belle Ellen bubble which drained company funds, the Bessemer company changed its name in 1903 to the Bessemer Coal, Iron and Land Company.

By 1925, the Bessemer company was selling land, developing subdivisions and building homes for the ever-expanding city population. There were practically no vacant houses. Using the lease-sale contract plan, the company and homes were valued at: in 1922-\$286,644.00, in 1923-\$522,000.00 and in 1924-\$759,000.00.

The company enticed Harbison-Walker Refractories Company to build a fire brick plant in Bessemer employing 300 men and the Hercules Powder Company plant three miles southwest of Bessemer.

If DeBardeleben was the father of Bessemer, then the Bessemer company was its mother. No other group played such a large role in raising a village to a town to a city.

Presidents of the Bessemer Coal, Iron and Land Company were: Henry F. DeBardeleben (1887-1888), William Berney (1888-1889), William Courtenay (1889-1890), Henry F. DeBardeleben (1890-1892), David Roberts (1892-1894), Henry F. DeBardeleben (1894-1897), L. E. Bruns (1897-1901), and Henry L. Badham (1901-1924), Henry L. Badham, Jr. (1924-1978) and John V. Jones (1978-1981).

Birmingham's Great Underground River Hoax

By Tom Badham

Supposedly Native Americans told early settlers of Jefferson County that an underground river ran the full length of what came to be known as Jones Valley. It was said that they told the settlers of traveling down the stream in a canoe from the Warrior River. In 1883, this tall tale was embellished and then broadcast via the newspapers around the country by a visitor who used the name of Professor Joseph Mulhatton or Mulhattan.

Mulhatton gained the reputation as the richest, most popular, and best commercial traveler in the United States as well as a champion liar. To a reporter Mulhatton once explained:

“People haven’t time to read books now-a-days, yet they must be entertained from the newspapers. So, I write short novels of the Jules Verne order and they are talked about everywhere. I never do any harm by my stories—any harm, you know, and I write for the amusement of myself and others—for amusement.”

Mulhatton read in a Birmingham newspaper an article about some men boring an artesian well within the square mile city limits of Birmingham who struck a small flowing stream of water at a depth of three hundred feet. Shortly afterwards a thrilling story under Professor Mullhatton’s byline appeared in the Louisville Courier-Journal which reported in part:

“...An immense underground river flowed under Birmingham, Alabama, and the entire town was in danger of falling in and being swept away! While excavating for the foundation of a large building, the stone crust that supported the few feet of earth above the river had been pierced, and it was breaking and giving way all over the city. Several buildings had fallen down, and one corner of the City Hall had settled four feet into a fissure which was rapidly widening, and soon the entire building would go down into the dark, underground river.”

The story made an immense sensation when it was printed. For two days the telegraph office at Birmingham was flooded with telegrams from all parts of the country, asking if there was any truth to the story.

The Louisville newspaper immediately printed the dispatch and, as was the custom, telegraphed other papers

the dispatch! The story quickly hit most of the major papers east of the Mississippi River. Cincinnati and New York City investors, who had also sunk fortunes into the future growth of Birmingham, were flashed the news. Now almost every non-local investor in Birmingham and the industries of Jones Valley wondered if the huge combined fortune poured into Birmingham was being rapidly washed away! This “lighthearted” hoax could develop into a real financial disaster for the struggling young city.

For two days the telegraph office at Birmingham was flooded with telegrams from all parts of the country asking if there was any truth to the story. After all, this was time of the Johnstown Flood and the Chicago Fire. News of real disasters around the world did come via telegraph to cities with newspapers hungry for juicy stories of blood and disaster for the entertainment of their readers.

Then on August 28, 1884, Birmingham’s Weekly Iron Age printed an expanded story by Professor Mulhatton under the title of “The Great Kentucky Scientist and Cave Expert Gives His Impressions of Our Subterranean River”. The article goes on to state:

A strong boat was quickly improvised in the cave from lumber which was lowered through the narrow inlet and the party proceeded down the river for at least fifteen miles before there was any obstruction to prevent them from going forward, and that was only a narrow formation of recent origin that can be easily cleared away. The natural tunnel through which the river flows is of almost uniform width, and say about 300 feet for the distance of the fifteen miles navigated, and the height is at least 150 feet, so that a steamship of the largest class could navigate it with ease; the depth of the stream varies from 45 to 70 feet. It is connected with tidewater, and this will give Birmingham a wonderful and cheap outlet to the sea, for the products of its furnaces, its mines, and industries generally.

The great subterranean river recently discovered under the city of Birmingham is undoubtedly the most remarkable discovery ever made on the American continent. The river is greater in volume than the mighty Mississippi. Its vast subterranean bed is undoubtedly due to the grind and cutting of immense icebergs during the glacial period.

Then at a subsequent Preadamite period violent upheavals of the earth toppled over the mountains which forms the present grand archway through which the icebergs continued to cut leaving it as now—a natural ship canal to the Gulf of Mexico. A prehistoric race undoubtedly utilized it for the transportation of metals from this section to the sea where they were transported to various parts of the world. Furnaces on a scale scarcely so magnificent yet as satisfactory in results to these prehistoric people undoubtedly existed on the present site of Birmingham, as ruins of these, and of ancient sun-temples are found in various parts of this county.”

“Added to this,” says Professor Mulhatton, “we discovered niches of the cave numerous articles of bronze, also statuary, numerous masonic emblems, and mummies with sandals on their feet—all in a perfect state of preservation. We also discovered the remains of many marine monsters of the dias or old red sandstone period, prominent among them the huge ICHTHYOSAURUS, which was undoubtedly used by these pre-historic races to drag their ships from what is now Birmingham to the Gulf of Mexico. These extinct sea monsters were docile and harmless and were harnessed to the ships laden with pig iron, which they pulled to the sea with the greatest of ease. They were more powerful than the most powerful locomotives of the present day. Hulls of these ancient ships are scattered all along the banks of this great subterranean stream.”

Further explorations will be made today by Prof. Mulhatton and his scientific party; and their next report will be eagerly looked for by the readers of the AGE as the wildest excitement now prevails over these latest developments. Thousands of people have been crowding around the entrance to the river clamoring for admission.

Prof. Mulhatton saw numerous eyeless fish and eyeless sea-monsters of the shark species; also eyeless amphibious animals of the alligator and reptile tribe. He stated a company should be formed at once to clear the river of any obstructions, and that boats and barges to navigate it should be constructed at once. As the entrance to it is on

one of the streets of the city, it will, therefore, belong to the city and cannot be claimed by any private individuals.

This discovery is of paramount importance to Birmingham, to Alabama and to the entire scientific world, and is worthy of the greatest enthusiasm.

The Weekly Iron Age published by Frank Evans as president and J.L. Watkins as editor-in-chief was an eight-page weekly newspaper published each Thursday. Among the columns printed in the Weekly Iron Age were Mary Gordon Duffee’s Sketches of Alabama, which ran from 1886 to 1887.

Early History of the **Birmingham-Jefferson Historical Society**

By Thomas M. West, Jr.

The founding and early history of the Birmingham-Jefferson Historical Society was rather unusual. On October 6, 1975, in the fourth-floor meeting room of the Birmingham Public Library, a group of interested parties met to discuss the re-organization and re-activation of the original Birmingham Historical Society which has been organized in 1942, but had been relatively dormant for many years.

Thirteen (13) individuals were present that day:

Mr. Rucker Agee
Mr. Lane Carter
Miss Elizabeth Cooper
Mr. Chris Doss
Mr. Paul H. Earle
Mr. Robert M. Montgomery
Mrs. Margaret D. Sizemore Mr. J. Morgan Smith
Mr. George Stewart
Mr. Richard J. Stockham
Mr. James F. Sulzby, Jr.
Mr. S. Vincent Townsend
Mr. Henry Tuttle.

Temporary officers elected at the organizational meeting that day were:

Chairman: J. Morgan Smith; Co-Chairman, Richard J. Stockham; Secretary, Margaret D. Sizemore; and Treasurer, James F. Sulzby, Jr.

On November 3, 1975, the group met again where a proposed constitution was ratified by a unanimous vote, a nominating committee was established and a date of January 12, 1976, was set for an annual meeting. A membership drive was put into place and a representative of the Junior League of Birmingham came, announcing that the League would like to join forces with the Society since their people were also interested in history and preservation and would like an opportunity to become active in this field. Some of the other attending this second meeting were Mrs. Elizabeth Agee, Mrs. Claude Vardaman, Mrs. Sarah Nesbitt, Mrs. Biddle Worthington, Mr. William M. Spencer, Mrs. Lee Bradley, Jr., and Mr.

Mortimer Jordan.

By the following year, 1976, the Society had already grown to three hundred (300) members, several active committees and was moving toward involvement in projects of permanent historical significance such as memorials, awards and recognition of distinguished historians. By this time both our Birmingham-Jefferson Historical Society and the Birmingham Historical Society were meeting regularly. Proposals for merger of the two groups over the years have failed and the consistent feeling has been that Birmingham like some other cities, could support two (2) historical organizations and the pair have coexisted ever since.

In the early years Boards of Trustees were established consisting of:

Mr. Rucker Agee,
Mrs. Charles Allison,
Mrs. Pelham H. Anderson, Jr.,
Mr. S. R. Benedict, Jr.,
Mr. Thomas H. Benners,
Mrs. Frank Bromberg, Jr.,
Mr. Lane Carter,
Mr. Chriss Doss,
Mr. Edward T. Douglass,
Mrs. Eddie Hubert Gilmore,
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Mr. George Stewart,
Mr. James F. Sulzby, Jr.

Mr. S. Vincent Townsend, Sr.,
Mr. Temple W. Tutwiler,
Mr. James A. Vann, Jr.
Dr. Leslie S. Wright

Since its founding the Birmingham-Jefferson Historical Society has held many meetings with many wonderful speakers, erected historical markers, published books, taken numerous pilgrimages, assisted in establishing a history center and done much to promote interest in things from our past.

END



The McAdory Plantation House Located in Bessemer, Alabama.

The McAdory Plantation House

By Rick Lewis

Located in Bessemer at 214 Eastern Valley Road, the McAdory Plantation House is one of the three West Jefferson County Pioneer Homes—joined by the Sadler and Owen family homes—built in the 19th century during the ‘Alabama Fever’ land settlement rush. The home serves as a visual time portal back to the early days of life in Alabama, years before Birmingham was officially founded.

Thomas A. McAdory Jr., a Scottish immigrant, constructed the rustic cabin home in 1840 for his wife, Emily, and six children. McAdory built the home in a traditional ‘dog-trot’ style, with a breezeway through the middle; this feature was later covered before an historical renovation associated with the home's status on the National Register of Historic Places reestablished the founding design.

Although the home was constructed as a fairly simple dwelling for a large family—containing five rooms and five separate fireplaces (though, only three of the original chimneys have survived to this day)—it still stands as a

testament to the craftsmanship and caretaking of this historic landmark.

Solid pine columns support the home's front porch, and its wooden siding and shingled roof provide a charming, if utilitarian, design.

Today, the upkeep and management of the home is handled by the West Jefferson County Historical Society, who received the home in the 1970s as a donation from descendants of the original McAdory family. The Society usually opens the home for tours in December, but tours can be arranged at other times as well.

The lineages of Thomas A. McAdory Jr. include important figures of note in Jefferson County history; these include: Robert McAdory, Bessemer city's first mayor, and Thomas McAdory Owen, the founder of the Alabama Department of Archives and History in 1901.

It is certainly worth a trip to Bessemer to see the humble beginnings of such an important and history-shaping family.



The Southern Vintage Fire Apparatus Museum

By Tom Badham

Like ice-cream, everybody likes fire-trucks. So, it's not surprising that Birmingham has an active chapter of the Society for the Preservation and Appreciation of Antique Motor Fire Apparatus in America. The society was founded in 1957 in New York as an educational non-profit.

They meet on the third Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM. Located in Building "F" of the old Continental Gin Complex at 4500 5th Ave. South, they open on Sunday afternoons this summer. You'll need to drive around to the east side of the main building. If you go left you end up at the big beer brewery and pub. In this huge former cotton

warehouse are both the Society's and members antique and no longer in service fire engines as well as other apparatus.

There is a lot to see, so bring good walking shoes. They have various exhibits as well as dozens of all types of fire trucks from all over the United States dating back to the 1920's. They have about a dozen of the trucks ready to roll for parades and other events. You may have seen them around town at those events.

So, with a little planning, you go and wander around the fire-trucks, then walk around to the other side of the complex and have a great meal and a cold beer. What could be better?

Tarrant's Unusual Locomotive

By Tom Badham

If you are ever driving north up Highway 79 in Tarrant, you can visit one of the most unusual locomotives in the Birmingham area. As you approach the southwest corner intersection of the quarry property, you will see what looks to be a miniature locomotive set out as a Tarrant City marker. Although not marked as such it is a Historic Marker. It's worth a few minutes of your time to inspect.

Peeking out from the left side of the loco is the brass H.K. Porter's builder's plate stamped with the loco's number, #7312. An online search only reveals that the H.K. Porter Compressed-Air Locomotive #7312 was built in February, 1941. That it was purchased from

Shorty's Rail Salvage at Ohatchee, AL, and restored at the Ensley Shops (no dates given) and its location.

That's right this little 90-ton 0-4-0 switcher locomotive is not steam, diesel or electrically driven – even though it has a smoke stack! Maybe that's where they hid its blow off valve? The switcher used compressed air alone to trundle around hauling full sized rail cars. There are a couple of demonstration videos on line of small compressed air locos operating in railroad parks. They chuff around, toot their whistles and use their sand domes just like the steam powered ones. One of the most famous and photographed of these air driven locos was full sized white painted one used by Henry Ford at his huge Rouge River Industrial Complex.



While the H.K. Porter Company went out of the locomotive building business in 1950's, the company's name lived on for many more years as the Porter-Cable electrical company which made drills and other electrical tools. The Porter company's catalog featured locomotives of almost any size from full sized coal or oil-fired steam locomotives to little compressed air powered donkey engines for pulling mine or tram cars.

Henry K. Porter started with a small machine shop in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, which repaired and built industrial equipment. The company received its first order for a locomotive on March 4, 1867. They began specializing in four wheeled, saddle tank locomotives for small industrial railroads. In 1890 the Porter company built its first compressed-air locomotive for a coal mine in Pennsylvania.

Air was stored in two tanks, and used to drive the pistons instead of steam. Porter went on to build over

400 compressed-air locomotives for use in mines, plants, and the New Orleans Street Railway (trolleys). In ten years, Porter had captured over 90% of the market.

For many years electrical and air powered locomotives were used in situations where steam and diesel-powered locomotives were un-useable due to safety, convenience or economic concerns. Having a coal-fired steam engine in a coal mine is never a good idea. Mines and quarries used many of them since most had huge air-compressors on site to run air-powered drills and mine ventilation systems. The plants included large food processing plants, huge grain and flour silos whose dust is very explosive as well as rayon plants like the one that was in Decatur (the 3M plant).

Who knew that rayon is very explosive while it is being made? If used as a switch engine or rail yard engine, the air tank could easily be recharged between shifting cars around as the cars were being loaded.





Also, as well as being cleaner, most of the locomotives needed much less maintenance than a steam powered boiler equipped loco.

When the automobile made its appearance roads had to be drastically upgraded. By 1921 the Porter company was enjoying a booming business in both the United States and in Europe which was rebuilding after World War I. Porters were a favorite choice among road grading contractors, who used light, portable tracks to carry the wooden tipper cars that were the earth moving equipment of the day.

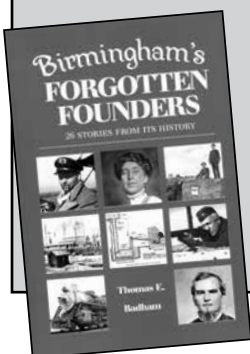
After 1939 with the death of Henry K. Porter, the company began a long decline and would eventually

declare bankruptcy. Thomas Mellon Evans purchased the company, determined to turn it around. Along with the Porter Company he bought other manufacturing companies, adding them to his conglomerate.

Locomotive production increased again during World War II, but demand for steam locomotives dwindled post-war. The H.K. Porter Company became primarily a holding company for the many subsidiaries Evans acquired. In 1950, the company built its last locomotive. The locomotive parts business and all the required patterns were sold to the Davenport Locomotive Works in Iowa.

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Birmingham's Forgotten Founders

Stories of the triumphs, heartbreaks and failures of the daring pioneers that founded our city. Including stories of Birmingham men and women whose stories may have been forgotten through the years. Birmingham has been home to brave soldiers, sailors and airmen whose deeds have had very little publicity.