

10-1-1971

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Recommended Citation

Russell, Bessie (1971) "The First Twenty Years of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 1: No. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol1/iss4/3>

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THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS OF THE HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By BESSIE RUSSELL

The Huntsville Historical Society held its organizational meeting on November 18, 1951, at the historic home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Chase on Adams Street.¹ In addition to the forty-three interested persons attending, there were also three members of the Alabama Historical Association: Rucker Agee, president, and Hugh W. Cardon and Allan Rushton, members of the executive committee. William H. Jenkins and Frank Chenault represented the North Alabama Historical Association.

But this was not the genesis of our society. The real beginning was when a young lady, Miss Frances Roberts, began teaching history at the Huntsville High School. She was vitally interested in all phases of history, but especially the history of Huntsville, Madison County, and Alabama. An active member of the Alabama Historical Association, she was placed on the executive committee of that group in 1951.

In the meantime I had started working at the Huntsville Public Library. With the help of Mrs. Elizabeth Beamguard, the director, I was cataloguing and expanding the historical collection started by Mrs. Mattie Darwin, one of Huntsville's first librarians. Miss Roberts and I talked about organizing a local historical society. It was through her close connection with the state group that the ground was laid for our organizational meeting.

The reaction to the new group from the out of town guests was quite favorable as evidenced by letters written the following week. Mr. Agee wrote: "The organization of the Madison County Historical Society went off splendidly yesterday afternoon. I congratulate you and your associates on this fine beginning."² Mr. Rushton commented:

"Mr. Agee, Mr. Cardon and myself had a pleasant experience in Huntsville yesterday and we all agreed on the trip back to Birmingham that Huntsville will soon have the outstanding society in the state. The combination of cultural individuals who were present and the wealth of historical subjects relating to Madison County almost make it certain that the Madison County Historical Unit will be a successful undertaking."³

At the organizational meeting Henry Chase was appointed as temporary chairman until permanent officers could be selected. The first regular meeting of the Society was held December 9, 1951, at the James Watts home. In the absence of Mr. Chase, Dr. Roberts presided and the following officers were elected for one year: President, Henry Chase; Vice President, Judge Thomas W. Jones; Secretary & Treasurer, Felix Newman; Board of Governors, Reese Amis and Harry Rhett, three years; Mrs. Sallie Gill and Mrs. R. J. Lowe, two years; and D. C. Monroe and Josh Kelly, one year. It was stipulated that each retiring president would become a member of the Board.

"Huntsville Historical Society" was selected as the official name of the organization and the annual dues were set at one dollar. New members were selected by invitation and voted on by the member-

ship. Quarterly meetings were to be held on the second Sunday of the month at three p.m. in the reading room of the Huntsville Public Library unless otherwise specified.

The purpose of the Society was set forth in Article II of the bylaws which stated: "the purpose of this society is to afford an agency for the expression around those having common interests in (1) collecting and preserving information about any past phase of community life in Huntsville, Alabama, and (2) in recording the history of the section of which Madison County is a part."

A special meeting was held in the city hall auditorium with representatives of the Alabama Historical Association on August 16, 1953, when our first two historical markers were erected. The invocation was given by the Reverend F. H. Heidelberg. Words of welcome were extended by Mr. Chase, the president.⁴ Mayor Robert Searcy of Huntsville spoke on behalf of the city and Commission Chairman Roy Stone on behalf of Madison County. The response by the Alabama Historical Association was given by William H. Brantley Jr., past president of the state group. Dr. Ralph Draughn, president of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, delivered the principle address.

The first marker honoring "Huntsville's Firsts" was erected in front of the public library on the corner of Madison Street and Gates. It was my pleasure to participate in the unveiling with Judge Thomas W. Jones. The second marker honoring the formation of Madison County was placed on the west side of the Madison County Courthouse. It was unveiled by Mrs. Joe Cooper Sr. and Patrick Richardson.

At the December, 1953, meeting the following officers were elected: President, Reverend F. H.

Heidelberg; Vice President, Judge Thomas W. Jones; Secretary & Treasurer, Felix Newman; Board of Governors, Reese Amis, Harry Rhett, D. C. Monroe, Josh Kelly, Ed Burwell, Joe Falt, and Henry Chase. Reverend Heidelberg resigned in March because he was moving out of the city. At this meeting the members voted to invite the Alabama Historical Association to hold its annual meeting in Huntsville in April, 1955.

In June, 1954, Judge Jones assumed the duties of the presidency and Harry Daniel was unanimously elected as vice president. This meeting was held in the historic John Hunt Morgan home with Mrs. B. A. Stockton as hostess. The following officers were elected at the December meeting: President, Judge Thomas W. Jones; Vice President, Harry Daniel; Recording Secretary, Mrs. C. H. Russell; Corresponding Secretary, Mrs. M. U. Griffin and Treasurer, Charles D. Lyle.

The Alabama Historical Association held its annual meeting in Huntsville on April 23-24, 1955, with the Huntsville Historical Society and the Huntsville Branch of the American Association of University Women serving as joint hosts. During the meeting Mr. Chase presented to the state association three markers erected by the local Society honoring the First National Bank, the Masonic Temple, and the birthplace of John Hunt Morgan. Every member of the Huntsville Historical Society was on a committee. Through the concerted efforts of all local participants the meeting was a high success for the 318 people who registered.

In 1955 Huntsville celebrated its Sesquicentennial. Members of the Society served on planning committees, did research work, and wrote articles for the newspaper and the album which was pub -

lished in book form. Much material in the form of books, manuscripts, and pictures from the public library's historical collection was used. At the December meeting Mrs. Burke Fisk presented each member present with an illustrated booklet prepared by the Huntsville Manufacturing Company entitled "Historical Edition of the Huntsville Parker." This booklet was edited by Mrs. Fisk.

The year 1956 was an eventful one for the Society. At the March meeting the following officers were elected: President, Miss Alice Thomas; Vice President, Joe Falt; Secretary, Mrs. Burke Fisk, and Treasurer, Charlie Lyle. In April a marker was unveiled at the site of Green Academy, one of the early schools of Alabama having been chartered in 1812. This marker, sponsored by the East Clinton Parent-Teacher Association, was unveiled by Miss Ella Ware, one of the teachers in the first public school built on the lot in 1882. Miss Ware was assisted by Miss Martha Askins. In June the Society met at the ancestral home of Miss Lucy McCrary near Three Forks of Flint. At this meeting it was voted to change the meetings from the second to the third Sunday of each quarter. Miss Thomas gave an interesting paper on Green Academy, and distributed booklets prepared by Mrs. Fisk showing handdrawn pictures of the public schools that have been on the lot where the Academy stood. In September, members heard a report from Judge Jones of the special committee on the city's proposal to rename the Huntsville streets.⁵ The committee's study and the resultant proposal filed with the city outlined a three part system whereby historical names could be retained. Along with this proposal the committee furnished a carefully prepared list of 100 names closely associated with the

city's development in the hope that names of new streets could be selected.

In September, 1957, a marker sponsored by W. P. Dilworth Sr. was unveiled at the site of the former Monte Sano Female Academy on Monte Sano. This school was founded in 1830 by the Reverend and Mrs. James Rowe. The program preceding the unveiling was held in the Monte Sano Methodist Church where people had worshipped for over fifty years. About forty descendants, including three granddaughters of the Rowes were present. The marker was unveiled by Jack and Susie Thiemonge and accepted by Mayor Searcy on behalf of the city.

The officers elected for 1958 were: President, Joe B. Falt Jr.; Vice President, Dr. Frances Roberts; Recording Secretary, Mrs. Burke Fisk; Corresponding Secretary, Miss Alice Thomas, and Treasurer, Philip Mason. The Society that year suggested to the city that the name Governor's Drive would be an appropriate title for the joining thoroughfares of Big Cove Road, Longwood Drive, and Fifth Avenue. This suggestion was accepted by the city.

A marker sponsored by the Virginia Clay Clopton Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy was dedicated on September 10 at "Weldwood", the home of Senator and Mrs. Clement C. Clay at Gurley. This marker honored Mrs. Clay Clopton author of the Belle of the Fifties. Patrick Richardson gave the dedicatory address.

Members began their third quarterly meeting by attending a memorial service in the circuit courtroom at the county courthouse honoring one of their charter members and past president, the late Judge Jones. It was through Judge Jones' efforts that many of the valuable historical records of Madison

County were preserved. At the March, 1959, meeting Dr. Roberts read a special tribute to Judge Jones.⁶

In May, 1959, a marker was erected at the site of the former Huntsville Female College, a famous college which was built in 1851 and destroyed by fire in 1895. Mrs. John Mastin, a descendent of Dr. W. G. Price, a long time president of the college, unveiled the marker. Later that year the Society arranged a tour of historical places in Huntsville for delegates attending the Convention of Alabama League of Municipalities which met in Huntsville.

The officers for 1960-61 were as follows: President, Dr. Frances Roberts; Vice President, Mrs. C. H. Russell; Secretary, Mrs. Burke Fisk and Treasurer, Mrs. Ward F. Sparkman.

In June, 1960, Dr. A. B. Moore, director of the Alabama Civil War Centennial Commission, spoke to the Society and urged that a local commission be speedily organized so that Madison County could actively participate in the Centennial. Mr. and Mrs. Jack Harbarger were duly appointed as joint chairmen of the local Civil War Centennial Committee. A steering committee was appointed consisting of Dr. Roberts, chairman; Miss Eugenia Smith, Mr. Thompson Kelly and the Reverend Emil Joffrion.

At the March meeting Mrs. Anna Rosborough was appointed to serve on a committee for the preservation of historic buildings still standing in the Heart of Huntsville area. Mrs. Harbarger announced that the Huntsville-Madison County Civil War Centennial Commission had been chosen. The committee included Eugene McLain, chairman; George Mahoney, co-chairman; and Miss Marie Moore, secretary. Dr. Roberts reported that the Society would join with the Virginia Clay-Clopton U. D. C.

Chapter in erecting a marker at Maple Hill Cemetery on Memorial Day, 1962 in connection with the Centennial program.

The September meeting was held at the Farley Junior High School for the dedication of the Ditto's Landing Whitesburg Marker. Rucker Agee, chairman of the Alabama Historical Association's marker committee, gave the dedicatory address. Several members of the White family for whom Whitesburg was named were special guests.

In 1961 the following officers were elected: President, Robert Smith; Vice President, Mrs. F. W. Sparkman; Recording Secretary, Edmund Duffey; Corresponding Secretary, Mrs. Robert Head; Treasurer, Miss Kathleen Johnston; Directors, Mrs. M. U. Griffin, Glenn Grimwood, Mrs. C. H. Russell, Reavis O'Neal, Mrs. Philip Mason, and past presidents.

On March 18, 1962 the Society observed its tenth anniversary with a tea at the home of Dr. and Mrs. E. V. Caldwell on Adams Street. The lovely reception rooms were decorated with arrangements of jonquils, narcissus and carnations in yellow, white and St. Patrick's green. Mrs. Fisk gave a resume' of the first ten years of the Society.

On Memorial Day, May 6, 1962, the Society and the Virginia Clay-Clopton Chapter jointly dedicated the marker to the Confederate soldiers buried in Maple Hill Cemetery. Dr. Herbert Hughes gave the main address. After an impressive ceremony those present were taken on a historical tour of the cemetery by W. F. Sparkman.

At the September meeting, James Record, Chairman of the Madison County Board of Commissioners, presented a letter from the commissioners stating that their 1962-63 budget would include \$1,000



DR. W. M. McKISSACK,

Present president of the Huntsville Historical
Society.

for eight historical markers. The Society would select the sites and handle all the details of erecting the markers. At a special meeting later that month recommendations were sent to the County Commissioners concerning the safe keeping of county records while the new courthouse was being built. The Society also recommended that the new courthouse be of timeless architecture to blend with present or future buildings located around the square. Recommendations were also sent to the City Council urging it to set up a historical commission to create and preserve a zone epitomizing "Historic Huntsville."

In 1964 the following officers were elected: President, Mrs. W. F. Sparkman; Vice President, Mrs. Burke Fisk; Corresponding Secretary, Mrs. Glenn C. Talley; Recording Secretary, Mrs. D. H. Shenk; and Treasurer, Miss Kathleen Johnston.

That year the Society began to plan for Alabama's approaching Sesquicentennial in 1969. Since most of the historic events connected with establishment of the state took place in Huntsville, it seemed that the main commemorative activities should be centered here. As groundwork for the planning of events, the Research Committee began a project to find out what Huntsville was like in 1819 when the Constitutional Convention met here to draw up Alabama's first Constitution. This study involved research in property records, newspapers and all original records available. It was a tedious and difficult undertaking, but the committee composed of Mrs. Fisk, chairman; Mrs. W. F. Sparkman, Mrs. Wayne Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Shenk, and Mrs. J. T. Deaton, persevered with the work. In April, 1969, they produced a map of 1819 Huntsville, showing many of the buildings that existed at that

time. This map, which the committee had evolved from its research, was copyrighted by the Society and published in a brochure with explanatory notes, photographs of six of the 1819 houses which are still standing, and a brief history of Huntsville to 1819, written by Dr. Roberts. The brochure was titled "A New Map of Huntsville 1819".⁷

In December 1966, Mrs. Fisk was elected President; Dr. William McKissack, Vice President; Mrs. Donald Shenk, Recording Secretary; Mrs. W. F. Sparkman, Corresponding Secretary; and Miss. Kathleen Johnston, Treasurer.

The erection of Madison County's new courthouse required three years. When it neared completion in 1967, Commission Chairman Record requested that the Society assume the responsibility to select items to be placed in the cornerstone. After several meetings of the Board, a large collection of valuable statistical and historical information about the county was assembled.

The Society was in charge of the cornerstone ceremony at the dedication program for the courthouse on March 5, 1967. Mrs. Fisk spoke briefly describing a collection of documents and artifacts which were placed in a copper box. She expressed the hope that the generation which one day would view the contents would find there evidence of the efforts made by this generation and past generations toward the development and progress of our great county. Members of the Board of Governors assembled while the box was placed inside. Mrs. Fisk presented the first trowel of mortar. W. A. Glenn, superintendent of construction, and W. E. Mayben, inspector of building construction, sealed the box into the cornerstone at the northwest corner of the building.

During their study the Research Committee obtained additional information about the site on which the Constitutional Convention met in 1819. It was found that the building that housed the Convention was built by Walker Allen, a cabinet maker, for use as a shop and warehouse. Following his death, it was offered for rent. Located one-half block south of the public square, it served as a convenient meeting place for the forty-four delegates elected from the twenty-two counties of Alabama Territory, who assembled in Huntsville in 1819 to draft a Constitution for Alabama to enter the Union.⁸

The committee also found a number of other important historical sites adjacent to Constitution Hall. Slightly to the north, on Franklin Street, stood the office of Clement Comer Clay, who chaired the committee that drafted the Constitution. This building also housed the United States Surveyor's Office and Huntsville Post Office in 1819. On the same half block facing Madison Street was located the office and printing press of the Alabama Republican, the newspaper that printed the Constitution. Next door, to the south, in the law office of John N. S. Jones, the books of the Huntsville Library, Alabama's first library, were made available to subscribers in October, 1819. The home of Stephen Neal, Madison County's first sheriff, occupied the northeast corner of Gates and Madison.

In 1968, at a time when the Constitution Hall site was vacant and earmarked by its owner, the Huntsville Housing Authority, for a multi-story parking garage, the Society initiated a movement to preserve the site and reconstruct on it the historic buildings of 1819. Dr. Roberts, Mrs. Fisk, Dr. McKissack, and Mrs. Rosborough were able to gain the support of the Huntsville Housing Authority, City Council,

Board of Madison County Commissions, Alabama Historical Association, Alabama Historical Commission, Alabama Sesquicentennial Committee, and numerous local organizations and individuals.

Early in 1969, the Alabama Sesquicentennial Committee asked the Society to handle the sale of official Sesquicentennial souvenirs in Madison County. On April 16, the Society gave an autograph party and reception to introduce the Alabama's First Lady's Cookbook, which was edited by Mrs. Albert P. Brewer, wife of then Alabama governor Brewer. Mrs. Brewer was honored at this affair which was held in Dunnivant's Mall with Burkett's Book Store handling the sale of books. The long lines of people who attended the party kept Mrs. Brewer busy autographing during the entire time. She was assisted by wives of the local legislative delegation who were special guests for the occasion.

On May 2-3, 1969, the Society was honored again to entertain the annual meeting of the Alabama Historical Association. Months of research, planning, and preparation were necessary to carry through the chosen theme "Huntsville in 1819" in program, decorations and food. The meeting, which was held at the imposing Carriage Inn, was one of the most elaborate and memorable ever held by the state association. Mrs. Richard Gilliam and Mrs. John R. Thomas, Jr., co-chairmen of registration, reported 476 members and guests, by far the largest attendance in the history of the organization. Each person attending was presented with a specially prepared packet of historical souvenirs relating to the Sesquicentennial.

The feature of the meeting was a bus tour of 1819 houses. The Pope-Watts, Bassett-Young, Erskine-McMains, and Fearn-Richardson homes were opened

for the occasion. A reception, held at the home of Mrs. Holliman Richardson, tour chairman, concluded the tour. A gala "Alabama 1819" banquet was held in the main ballroom of the Carriage Inn. Mrs. Jack F. Harbarger and her committee decorated the scores of round serving tables with fruit arrangements and lighted candles in brass candelabra. Large letters, suspended over the stage proclaimed "Alabama 1819". A towering fruit arrangement in a three-tiered epergne centered the front of the stage. In this setting, the choir from the University of Alabama in Huntsville rendered musical selections from the 1819 period. Typical foods of the period, served at the banquet, were selected by Mrs. Oscar Mason and her committee after many months of research on the subject. Each person received a souvenir program-menu and a drinking glass, which had been inscribed as a memento of the occasion.

The Saturday morning session was held at the Madison County Courthouse where an exhibit of historic documents, papers, and articles had been arranged by Miss Alice Thomas and her committee. Alabama's 1819 Constitution, the main feature of the exhibit, was on display in a specially constructed case. Brought to Huntsville the day before by Milo Howard, Director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the historic document remained in Huntsville where it was displayed most of the year for thousands of people to see it for the first time. The final event of the meeting was a luncheon at which Dr. Roberts, as outgoing president, gave the principle address.

An important event during the year was commemorated with a ceremony cosponsored by the Society and Tennessee Valley Genealogical Society, in cooperation with the Madison County courthouse

on August 2, 1969, to honor descendants of the forty-four delegates who had signed the Constitution in Huntsville exactly 150 years before. Mrs. Fisk served as general chairman and Mrs. Gilliam, as recognitions chairman. Mrs. V. W. Hamner, Jr., who undertook the task of locating descendants of the signers, succeeded in finding the addresses of 623 descendants, to whom specially printed invitations were mailed. Although they lived in many parts of Alabama and in other states, 224 descendants attended the program. Each honor guest was given a badge inscribed with his name and that of the ancestor who signed the Constitution. In the main lobby they viewed the Constitution and located the names of their ancestors.

The program, held on the second stair landing with the historical mural as a meaningful backdrop, began with a colorful flag ceremony. Dr. McKissack presided and introduced United States Senator John Sparkman, who in turn presented the guest speaker, Richard Walker Bolling, U.S. Representative from the Fifth Congressional District of Missouri, and a Great-great grandson of John Williams Walker, president of the Constitutional Convention. The names of the forty-four signers were read by Senator Sparkman from a scroll prepared by Mrs. Gilliam. As each signer's name was called his descendants were asked to stand.⁹

"Alabama Day," December 14, 1969, the 150th anniversary of the day Alabama entered the Union, was the last important historical event to be celebrated during the year. The Society and the Madison County Sesquicentennial Committee co-sponsored an observance of the day at the courthouse at 2:30 p. m. Philip M. Mason, chairman of the Sesquicentennial Committee, served as chairman for the Alabama

Day Program. Others on the program committee were Elbert L. Watson, Mrs. Wayne L. Smith, Dr. McKissack and Mrs. Gilliam. Commissioner Record was master of ceremonies.

The program began with the presentation by Explorer Post 303 of a large twenty-one star United States flag specially hand-made for the occasion by Mrs. Smith. Following the flag ceremony, a program of patriotic songs was presented by the Madrigal Singers of Butler High School. United States Senator James B. Allen, who was elected to the Senate exactly 150 years after the state's first congressional representative, gave the commemorative address. Speaking of some of the highlights of Alabama's dramatic past, he said that the introduction of the resolution of statehood for the Territory of Alabama was among the first business to be conducted in the new Senate chambers on December 6, 1819.

Other features of the program included a stirring rendition by the Drum and Bugle Corps of Sparkman High School. The story of the twenty-two star flag was told by Ramona Sharpe of Buckhorn High School. Dawn Alberg of Randolph School gave the Alabama Resolution of Admission. Explorer Post 303, then retired the twenty-one star flag and presented the twenty-two star flag, which included the star for Alabama.¹⁰ Dr. McKissack awarded to Mrs. Fisk, out-going president of the Society, a plaque in honor of her services to the group and her work with the Sesquicentennial. To close the program, Thomasena Morris, of Buckhorn High School, led the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner."

Following the program a brief business meeting was held and officers for 1970-71 were elected: President, Dr. William McKissack; Vice-President,

James Record; Recording Secretary, Mrs. Roy E. Blair; Corresponding Secretary, Mrs. Wayne L. Smith and Treasurer, Miss Kathleen Johnston. Elbert Watson was elected to a three year term as Director and Dr. Herbert L. Hughes was re-elected Director.

Under the present leadership of Dr. W. M. McKissack, the Society has continued to make substantial progress. The number of meetings has increased from four to six each year. One of the most important projects is the publication of our historical quarterly "Huntsville Historical Review" with Mr. Watson as editor.

When the National Park Service, under the auspices of the National Register of Historic Places, designated Huntsville's old Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company passenger depot as a national historic landmark on September 10, 1971, it gave further credit to the Society in that two of its members, Mrs. Gilliam and John Martz, prepared the papers for the nomination.

At this time the Society has grown to 265 active members. Much research has been done, many interesting papers given, and our historical collection has grown. We have cooperated with the city and state in historical events. We have enlarged our knowledge of the rich heritage of this area, and aided in its preservation for future generations. May we continue to grow and expand during the coming years.

Names of people who attended the first meeting of Madison County Historical Association, November 18, 1951.

Mrs. D. C. Adams	Mrs. James T. Watts
Mrs. C. H. Russell	Mrs. Vassar L. Allen
Mr. & Mrs. Clarence Watts	Miss Helen Petty
Mr. & Mrs. Joe Falt	Miss Dorothy Sandlin
Mr. & Mrs. Henry B. Chase	Mr. James Wade
Mr. & Mrs. T. P. Gates	Harry M. Rhett, Jr.
Mrs. R. J. Lowe	Miss Frances Roberts
Mr. Charlie Lyle	Miss Frances Jones
Mrs. Elizabeth Beamguard	Mr. Robert K. Bell
Mrs. Joe E. Cooper	Judge Thomas W. Jones
Mrs. Eugene Gill	Mr. James Record
Miss Mary Irby Mastin	Mr. C. C. Monroe
Mr. & Mrs. Josh Kelly	Mr. Alvin Dreger
Mr. & Mrs. Reese Amis	Mr. Joseph L. Askins
Mrs. Raphael Semmens	Mr. Roy L. Stone
Mr. & Mrs. Frederic Heidelberg	

¹The Chase home was erected in 1848 and was at various times occupied by the William McDowells, Mary C. Levert, and Mrs. Daniel Coleman families. The home is presently owned by Mr. & Mrs. Joe Falt.

²Rucker Agee to Frances Roberts, November, 1951.

³Allan Rushton to Roberts, November, 1951.

⁴All of the officers had been reelected at the December, 1962, meeting.

⁵Members of this committee were Judge Jones, Mr. Chase, Dr. Roberts, Mrs. Rosborough and Edwin Burwell.

⁶This tribute was printed, framed, and hung in the probate office and the library. A copy of this memorial was later given to Mrs. Jones.

⁷In 1970, the American Association for State and Local History honored the Society with a national award for the production of the map. This commendation has been framed and placed in the Huntsville Heritage Room of the Huntsville Public Library.

⁸This building, also used as a theater, was removed in 1821 and replaced with a new theater, which burned before it opened.

⁹This program coincided with the issuance in Huntsville of the U. S. six cent postage stamp honoring 150 years of Alabama Statehood. Many honor guests who attended the stamp ceremony in the morning and the luncheon, honoring Postmaster General Winton Blount, were escorted by Commissioner Record in a motorcade to the courthouse for the afternoon's historical observance.

¹⁰The Twenty-Two Star Flag was handmade for the occasion by Mrs. Gilliam.