

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 15 | Number 1

Article 1

9-1-1988

Maple Hill Cemetary

Joberta Wasson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wasson, Joberta (1988) "Maple Hill Cemetary," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 1. Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol15/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

Maple Hill Cemetery

by Joberta Wasson

On September 3, 1818, the City of Huntsville paid LeRoy Pope \$75.00 for a two acre plot of land to be used as a community burial ground. So began Maple Hill Cemetery on what is now its northwest corner. It has grown to encompass over one hundred acres.

An eerie and enthralling historical tour awaits those who browse among its towering trees and along its carriage lanes. Here lie five governors of Alabama, business and professional leaders, military men, and many other individuals who, though obscure, led fascinating lives. Maple Hill was registered by the Alabama Historical Association in 1962.

A civic group, the Twickenham Woman's Club, has made it easy to locate many points of interest in Maple Hill. Talented members have drawn a map which pinpoints them and gives short descriptive material. (The map, in brochure form, is available at the cemetery office.)

The best place to start a historic tour is at an unmarked grave on the north side of the main gate. Here lies a gypsy queen.² She fell ill and died while while the

gypsy tribe was encamped in Huntsville many years ago. Curious onlookers say that the funeral rites lasted far into the night. Mourners danced and sang around her grave, alternately pouring wine on it and imbibing, themselves.

Then, if we walk north along the west wall to a tombstone in the shape of a cross, we will see - literally - another gypsy. Her portrait is on her marker; handsome, dark-eyed Lena Mitchell's (1906-1959) face fits her profession - that of a fortune teller.

A few feet northeast a small stone between two tall shafts designates the grave of Jeremiah Clemens (1814-1865), Mark Twain's cousin. A Huntsville native, he was something of a writer himself, being the author of four romantic novels. But primarily, Jeremiah was a man of action. A hero of the Mexican War, he was elected Brigadier General of the Alabama militia when Alabama seceded from the Union. This honor displeased him, however, because he was opposed to secession. He resigned and bravely endured the shame of being called an "arch traitor." He died of pneumo-



The inscription on an ornate monument of twin fluted columns topped by urns hints at an intriguing story: "The Sisters" - "Mary E. Wright, wife of J.M. Wright; born in Nelson County, Va., Dec. 6, 1822; died at her sister's in Huntsville, June 7, 1855;" and "Margaret C. Moore, wife of Wm. H. Moore; born in Nelson County, Va., April 27, 1825; died at Oakwood, Huntsville, April 12, 1859."

The two obelisks in the background offer another brief history: "To the memory of Mary E., wife of Egbert J. Jones, who was born in Huntsville, Jan. 15, 1832, was married June 8, 1854, and died April 7, 1855;" and "Egbert J. Jones; an honored member of the Ala. Bar. Col. of the 4th Ala. Regiment; died at Orange Court House, Va. Sept. 1, 1861 of wounds received July 21, 1861 in First Battle of Manassas."

nia, a comparatively young man. (His home still stands at the corner of Clinton Avenue and Gallatin Street, now owned by Huntsville Utilities and used as offices.)

Nearby is the grave of Anne Bradshaw Clopton (1878-1956). As a little girl, she read about a German artist who painted on cobwebs. If he could do that, so can I, she told herself. She did indeed master the art and became famous. One of her works hangs in the Smithsonian Institution. The Burritt Museum here in Huntsville has many more.

To find Governor Robert Patton's (1809-1885) gravesite, we must go to the first carriage lane leading north. An enlightened statesman, he served during some difficult years, just before and immediately following the Civil War. He was ousted by the Reconstruction Act.

The Patton family plot has a singular beauty. In the spring tulips and daffodils nod brightly among the confederate violets and forget-me-nots which grow wild all over the cemetery. Blooming almost year-round are shrubs which were planted fairly recently. It seems that a few years ago an attractive young lady, a newcomer to Huntsville, visited this plot. She saw there the grave of one of the Governor's sons who had been a soldier of the Confederacy. As his marker attests, he had been killed at the battle of Shiloh. The young lady, reading the inscription, was overcome with a powerful feeling that she had known

this boy long ago. She was convinced that she had once been a nurse at Shiloh in a previous incarnation and had tended the fatally wounded boy. Now she felt he wanted her to beautify the neglected family plot. For more than a year she came, almost every sunny day, to plant, tend, and water. She has gone now but has left a legacy of beauty.

Across the lane from the Patton plot rests infamous Governor David Peter Lewis (1820-1884), in office during the carpetbag regime. He is said to have been greedy and devious. The story is told of how he sent out pleas for help for victims of a flood. Many kind souls sent food, clothing and money, but - there was no flood.

Continuing our stroll, we see the tall red granite cross which marks the grave of Governor Reuben Chapman (1799-1882). He was a state legislator and United States congressman as well as governor (1847-1849). In the Chapman family plot one headstone bears only the name "Mammy." The family had refused to obey an ordinance forbidding the interment of Negroes in Maple Hill.³ "She was our beloved nurse and one of our family and she stays with us." (Governor Chapman's home is located at 2404 Gaboury Lane.)

Just northeast of the Chapman plot, a Celtic cross marks the grave of LeRoy Pope Walker (1817-1884). Walker, as Confederate Secretary of War under Jefferson Davis, triggered the start of the Civil War by ordering Fort



The tombstone of LeRoy Pope Walker (1817-1884). He was a lawyer, state legislator, and first Secretary of War of the Confederate States of America. His grandfather was LeRoy Pope.

Sumpter in South Carolina to be fired upon. (Walker's home is located at 413 McClung Avenue.)

An imposing monument designates the grave of Thomas Bibb (1782-1839), Alabama's second governor. He was president of the first state senate, among other accomplishments. Governor Bibb has become the subject of one of the ghost stories in which all cemeteries seem to abound. He had passed away at the family home, Belle Mina in Limestone County, and was laid to rest there. Some twenty years later the body was exhumed and reinterred in Maple Hill. It is said that the governor tries unceasingly to find his way back home. At dusk,

especially on rainy evenings, a black hearse pulled by six black horses can be seen along the carriage lane, Governor Bibb seated within.

(Governor Bibb built a splendid Greek Revival home in Huntsville for his daughter Adeline Bibb Bradley. This home is at 300 Williams Avenue.)

A handsome monument topped by an urn memorializes Dr. David Moore (1787-1845). He was a true Renaissance man - planter, state legislator, friend, and personal physician to Andrew Jackson. He served on Jackson's medical staff during the Creek Indian Wars. And "he found the golden fleece hanging from the cotton stalk," ac-



The marker of Dr. David Moore (1787-1845), who was a physician, planter, state legislator, friend and personal physician to Andrew Jackson. In 1815 Dr. Moore was one of the town trustees to whom LeRoy Pope deeded thirty acres for the town of Huntsville.

According to a local newspaper, the **Weekly Democrat**. He died a rich man, but a generous man, as well.

Near the north wall, encompassed in an iron fence, is the family plot of another versatile and brilliant man, Dr. Thomas Fearn (1789-1863). He, too, served in the Creek Indian Wars. Business man and public servant, state legislator and trustee of the University of Alabama, he, too, holds an important place in the history of Huntsville.

His greatest contribution, however, was as a physician. He pioneered the use of quinine in the treatment of malaria. The recipient of many honors, he was well-known internationally but was always homeward-bound - the father of seven motherless daughters. (Dr. Fearn and his family lived at 517 Franklin Street.)

A DAR marker honors Albert Russel (1755-1818) who served seven years as a Revolutionary War soldier.



This obelisk is in memory of William Robinson (1808-1852) and his family. Robinson was a planter and sheriff (1840-1843) of Madison County. His widow built Quietdale, the mansion he had designed and gathered materials for prior to his untimely death.

Near the Civil War Veterans Monument lies William Robinson (1808-1852), high sheriff of Madison County. He designed a plan and gathered the materials for a mansion to be called "Quietdale" but did not live to enjoy it. His widow built the home exactly as he had specified, even to the witches glass at the front door. (Quietdale is located at 401 Quietdale Drive.)

A strange legend is connected with Mary Chambers

Bibb, a young bride who died in 1835 at the age of nineteen. She is interred in a mausoleum which is completely sealed on all sides. [See cover photo.] The legend has it that she is inside, sitting upright in a rocking chair. Her wedding, to Governor Bibb's son, was to have been a very gala affair. Her wedding dress had come all the way from Paris. At that time the fashion was for young ladies to have very pale complexions. Because her face was not as white as she



A simple, unadorned marker indicates the resting place of George Gilliam Steele (1798-1855), one of Huntsville's most noted architects and builders.

wished, she dosed herself on what was a very common, but very dangerous, remedy - arsenic. Unfortunately, she used too much. Just three months after her marriage, she died. It is told that for some time she had feared she was dying and begged not to be buried underground.

No one now living knows if the legend is true, but one lady, a native Huntsvillian, says, "My mother, who is ninety years old, declares that when she was a little girl, she was told by her great-aunt, who was born in 1850, that it was so." The mausoleum of Mary Chambers Bibb was designed by the noted Huntsville architect George Steele.

He himself, George Gilliam Steele (1798-1855), is buried close by with only a modest headstone. He designed (the present) First Alabama Bank building, other public buildings, and many homes, including his own mansion, Oak Place. (A Baptist church now owns Oak Place, located at 808 Maysville Road.)

Farther east under a grove of magnolia trees some two hundred unknown Confederate soldiers are silent reminders of the lost cause.

Nearby a pretty rosette decorates the gravestone of Mollie Teal (1852-1899), the town's most famous "Lady of the Evening." She was the glamorous madam of a house of



The headstone of Mollie Teal (1852-1899). She was a madam who ran a popular house of "ill repute." She willed her large house to the city of Huntsville, and the first city hospital was located there from 1904 until 1926.

prostitution, perhaps the finest "sportin'" house the town ever saw. When she died she left her "house" to the city for either a school or a hospital. So, it became Huntsville's first hospital.

Turning north, we may visit the grave of Governor Clement Comer Clay (1789-1866). He rode into Huntsville on horseback in 1811 with law books stuffed into his saddle bags. He set up a law practice and rose to the top of his profession. He became chairman of the committee which drafted the Alabama Constitution in 1819, was first chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, United States congressman and

senator, and governor of Alabama.

Resting in the same plot is his famous granddaughter Virginia Clay (1862-1911). When her father Withers Clay, editor of the **Weekly Democrat**, fell ill, she took over his position. Assisted by her sister Suzanna, she successfully edited the **Democrat** for more than twenty years. The first woman news editor in the south and possibly in the United States, she was nationally recognized and respected. She was even invited to address the National Editorial Association at its meeting in 1905. Her political editorials were often reprinted in newspapers as



Monument marking the Huntsville Meridian. "Richard W. Anderson caused this monument to be erected in memory of deceased relations and to perpetuate the Huntsville Meridian."

far away as Michigan and New York. (The J. Withers Clay family, including Virginia, lived for many years at 513 Eustis Street.)

Turning south, we reach a beautiful snow-white marble monument soaring above all others in Maple Hill. Near its pinnacle on its east and west sides is carved the word "Meridian." This shaft, indeed, marks the primary Huntsville meridian. Legal descriptions of land over a wide area are measured from it. The monument was commissioned by Richard Anderson

(1790-1859), a wealthy land broker, in honor of his brothers and sisters. Although he was a bachelor, he loved children. A bevy of them followed him wherever he went, except on his longest jaunts. Reportedly, it was not unusual for him to walk from Huntsville to Whitesburg and back before breakfast.

Across a carriage lane from the Meridian is another Thomas Bibb (1792-1871), a cousin of the Governor and a hero of the War of 1812. At



Mausoleum of Albert Russel Erskine (1871-1933). Russel Erskine was an industrialist and president of the Studebaker Corporation (1915-1933). The Hotel Russel Erskine in Huntsville was named for him. He donated the Erskine Addition to Maple Hill in 1918 and the stone entranceway in 1916 in memory of his mother, Sue Ragland Erskine.

the Battle of New Orleans he single-handedly captured a British major. After the war he settled in Athens, Alabama and into a successful contracting business.

There is a strange tale in Bibb family records of an honor guard being placed at his gravesite by General Sherman during the Civil War because he had been a war hero. This obviously could not have been true because Bibb did not die until 1871. General Sherman did visit Huntsville in April 1871, near the time of Thomas Bibb's death. We might surmise that he placed an honor guard at the grave during

this visit, although no record of it has been found in existing newspapers.

Now we go up the broad central avenue to a handsome mausoleum which is Maple Hill's veritable focal point. In this crypt is interred Albert Russel Erskine (1871-1933).⁴ He was an industrial magnate, the perfect example of a hometown boy who made good. He began his career as a \$15.00 a week railroad company office boy when he was a fifteen-year-old school drop-out. He soon became head bookkeeper. Then by a series of successes, he became the multimillionaire president of the Studebaker Automobile



This mausoleum is the resting place of John Lee Robinson (1891-1947) and his sheepdog Mickey (1929-1947). Robinson was a successful cotton broker. The emblem carved over his name at the top of the tomb represents two bales of cotton.

Corporation in South Bend, Indiana. He was also a civic leader and president of Notre Dame University's lay Board, as well.

Russel Erskine's success came to him so easily that he never learned to cope with failure. For the first time in his life, he encountered it when the Studebaker Company went into receivership during the great depression. He died from a self-inflicted bullet wound.

An apparition of an angel appears at night on the portal of his mausoleum. Whatever combination of chemicals - or ghostly ectoplasm - causes this phenomenon, it is there. (The Russel Erskine

Hotel at 123 East Clinton Avenue was named in his honor. The building has since been converted to apartments.)

In another mausoleum south of Erskine's lies John Lee Robinson (1891-1947) and his sheepdog Mickey. Naturally, the dog preceded him in death. "My dog stuck by me all his life and now I'll stick by him." John L. Robinson was a successful cotton broker.

Behind the Erskine mausoleum a tiny flat stone, etched with the outline of a dog, marks the resting place of Pepe, the beloved chihuahua of the Edward Rolfe family.



A Gothic style mausoleum serves as a memorial to Dr. William Henry Burritt (1869-1955). Dr. Burritt willed his home on Round Top Mountain to the city of Huntsville for a museum and nature preserve. Mysteriously, the mausoleum contains seven unidentified caskets, in addition to the caskets of Burritt family members.



A small flat stone marks the grave of Pepe (c. 1959-1975), a Mexican Chihuahua. The little dog was the beloved companion of the Edward Rolfe family.

Walking back down the broad avenue, we pass an intriguing stone with the message: "Jessup Whitehead 1833-1889; Chef de Cuisine; Monte Sano Hotel; And Author of Many Cook Books."

Across from this marker, a slender shaft bears the inscription: "Adelaide Eugene Bankhead; July 14, 1880-February 23, 1902; Beloved wife of William Bankhead."

She was the mother of famous actress Tallulah Bankhead and of Eugenia Bankhead, longtime keeper of the state archives. Her husband was William Bankhead, for many years Speaker of the House of Representatives. She died in childbirth with Tallulah. (At the time of Tallulah's birth, the Bankhead family lived in an apartment on an upper floor of the Schiffman Building at the corner of East Side Square and Eustis Street.)

Farther down the avenue a beautiful Gothic style mausoleum serves as a memorial to Dr. William Henry Burritt (1869-1955). He willed his house and grounds on Round Top Mountain to the City of Huntsville for a museum and nature preserve. It opened its doors in 1957 and now regularly attracts thousands of visitors.

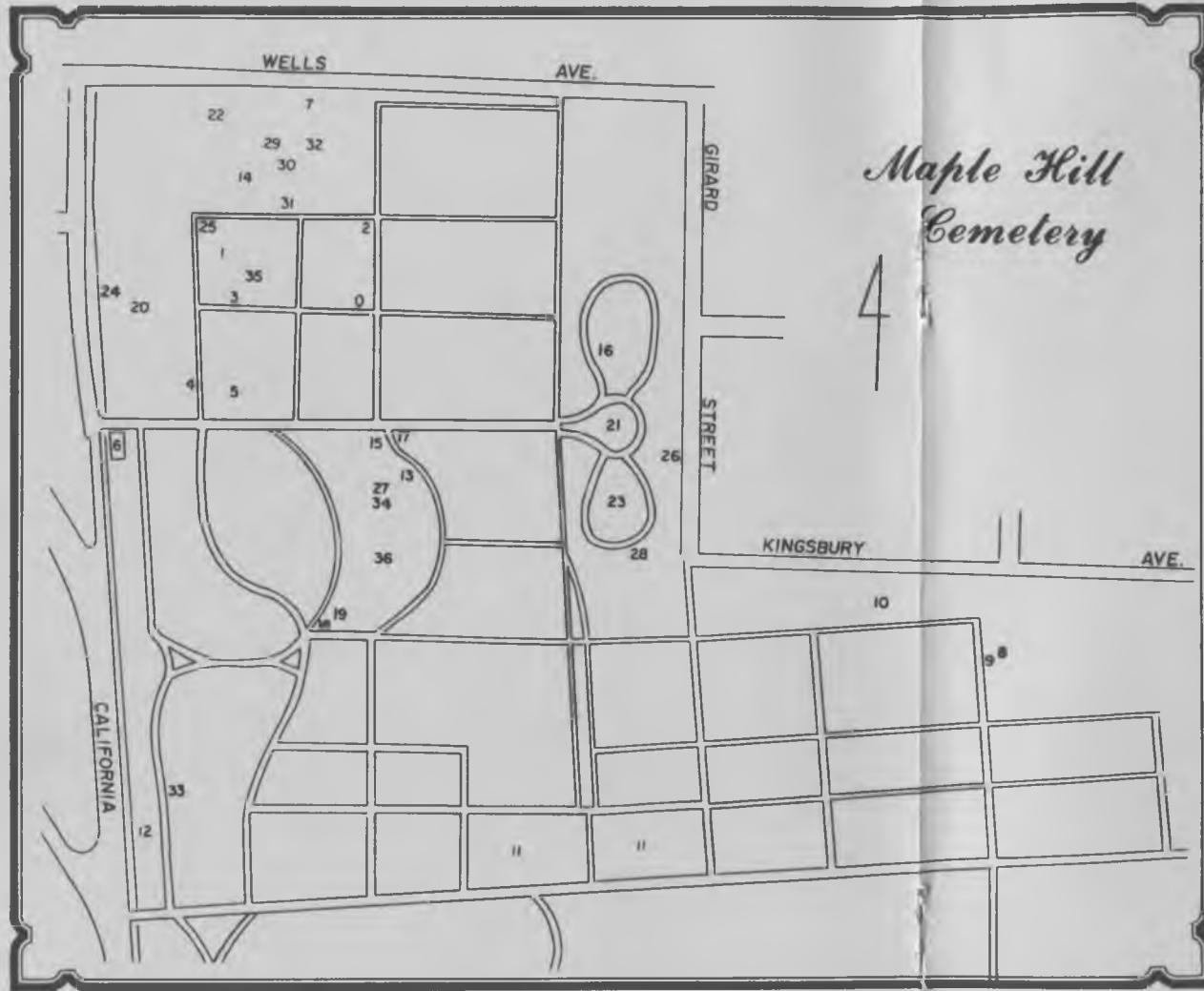
In 1899 when Dr. Burritt was a young, handsome local physician, he received a proposal of marriage from a lady. She was a widowed tobacco heiress, Mrs. Josephine Drummond, twenty years his senior. He accepted. They lived happily in her home in

St. Louis for many years, but after her death and after inheriting the bulk of her estate, he returned to Huntsville in 1933. The mausoleum, erected to his specifications soon after his return, contains the bodies of his mother and father and of his first wife Pearl. His ashes remain in an urn to the left of the entrance. Mysteriously, the mausoleum contains seven other caskets, all sealed, indicating bodies within. No one knows whose bodies because there is no identification.

To the south of the Burritt mausoleum rests LeRoy Pope (1764-1845), the man honored as the Father of Huntsville. Lawyer, planter, and early resident, his contributions to the physical, economic, and political development of the town were considerable. (His home is known as Echols Hill and is located at 403 Echols Avenue.)

Sharing a tombstone with Pope is his son-in-law, John Williams Walker (1783-1823). He was president of the state's 1819 constitutional convention and the first United States senator from Alabama.

Still farther south a simple gray stone, with the inscription "Blessed Are the Pure in Heart," memorializes poet-artist Maria Howard Weeden (1847-1905). Her gentle evocation of life in late 19th century Huntsville shows black servants and white masters all as one loving family, all poor together. Her portraits of blacks display a



Map of the historic part of Maple Hill Cemetery. The map is from the Maple Hill Cemetery brochure which is available at the cemetery office.

MAP LEGEND:

- 0 ** Meridian.
- 1 ** Gov. Thomas Bibb, 1782-1839.
- 2 * Gov. Clement Clay, 1789-1866.
- 3 * Gov. Reuben Chapman, 1799-1882.
- 4 * Gov. Robert Miller Patton, 1809-1885.
- 5 * Gov. David Peter Lewis, 1820-1884.
- 6 Cemetery Office.
- 7 Civil War Veterans Monument and burial ground.
- 8 World War I, World War II, and Korean War Monument.
- 9 Disabled American Veterans Monument.
- 10 Garden Area.
- 11 Potter's Field.
- 12 Hebrew Burial Ground.
- 13 * Adalaide Eugene Rankhead, 1880-1902.
- 14 ** Mausoleum, Mary Chambers Bibb, 1816-1835.
- 15 ** Mausoleum, Dr. William H. Burrirt, 1869-1955.
- 16 Henry B. Chase, 1870-1961.
- 17 * Chef Jessup Whitehead, 1833-1889.
- 18 * Clement Claiborne Clay, 1816-1882.
- 19 * Virginia Clay-Clopton, 1823-1915.
- 20 * Anne Bradshaw Clopton, 1878-1956.
- 21 ** Mausoleum, Albert Russel Erskine, 1871-1933.
- 22 * Dr. Thomas Fearn, 1789-1863.
- 23 Dr. Carl August Grote, 1887-1964.
- 24 * Lena Mitchell, 1906-1959.
- 25 ** Dr. David Moore, 1787-1845.
- 26 ** Pepe, circa 1959-1975.
- 27 ** LeRoy Pope, 1764-1845.
- 28 ** Mausoleum, John Lee Robinson, 1891-1947.
- 29 ** William Robinson, 1808-1852.
- 30 * Albert Russel, 1755-1818.
- 31 ** George Gilliam Steele, 1798-1855.
- 32 ** Mollie Teal, 1852-1899.
- 33 Rev. Jerimiah F. Treacy, 1826-1872.
- 34 ** John Williams Walker, 1783-1823.
- 35 ** LeRoy Pope Walker, 1817-1884.
- 36 * Maria Howard Weeden, 1847-1905.

- * Mentioned in text.
- ** Mentioned in text and pictured.



ABOVE: The family plot of LeRoy Pope (1764-1845) and John Williams Walker (1783-1823). The two men share a tombstone. Pope is honored as the "Father of Huntsville" for his contributions to the physical, economic, and political development of the town. He was a lawyer, planter, and the chief justice of the first Madison County court. Walker, who was Pope's son-in-law, was a lawyer, president of the 1819 constitutional convention, and first U. S. Senator from Alabama. Also, he was the father of LeRoy Pope Walker. (See page 6).

OPPOSITE PAGE: Standing like sentinals, nearly identical tombstones mark the graves of five babies of S. H. and M. A. Allison. The parents are not buried anywhere near the graves of their four sons and one daughter. The dates carved on the markers are: "Oct. 19, 1853, 18 days; Dec. 13, 1853, 2 years; Dec. 28, 1856; March 3, 1858; Sept. 4, 1860."

rare beauty. (The Weeden family home, now a house museum, is at 300 Gates Avenue.)

Soon we arrive at a five-point intersection. Here are the last two graves we will visit, those of Clement Claiborne Clay (1816-1882) and his wife Virginia. The oldest son of Governor Clay, he became a lawyer, a state legislator, and then United States senator.

On January 21, 1861, southern senators by prearrangement announced the withdrawal of their states from the Union and walked out of the Senate before crowded galleries, Senator Clay among them. Later he became politically active in the Confederate cause. He was imprisoned with Jefferson Davis in Fortress Monroe in 1865, falsely accused of conspiring to assassinate President

Abraham Lincoln. President Andrew Johnson signed their release in 1866.

Senator Clay's wife Virginia (1823-1915), dynamic and lovely, became the belle of Washington in the pre-war decade. She later wrote **A Belle of the Fifties**, an account of her happy years there. Five years after her husband's death she married Judge David Clopton but kept the name Clay, as well.

Our tour has taken us mainly through the oldest parts of the cemetery. Outside of its historic sections we visited only the Erskine and Robinson mausoleums and the grave of the little dog Pepe. Maple Hill has many more stories to tell, some of them merely hinted at by inscriptions on forgotten tombstones.



FOOTNOTES

1 Further research has shown that there are a few minor errors in the brochure.

2 The rank of "Queen" does not exist in the gypsy hierarchy. "Queen," as the gypsies use it, must mean "Matriarch."

3 This ordinance was repealed in 1969.

4 The mausoleum had been erected several years before by Russel Erskine as the designated final resting place for him and his family.



SOURCES

Books:

- Bedsole, Vergil. **The Life of Jeremiah Clemens.** University, Ala.: The Author, 1934.
- Betts, Edward. **Early History of Huntsville, Alabama.** Montgomery: Brown Publishing Co., 1909.
- Marks, Henry. **Sketches of the Tennessee Valley in Antebellum Days.** Huntsville: Southern Press, Inc., 1976.
- Taylor, Judge Thomas Jones. **A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama, 1712-1840.** University, Ala.: Confederate Publishing Co., 1886.

Newspapers and Periodicals:

- "City Drops Cemetery Race Ban." **Huntsville Times**, 10 Sept. 1969.
- Cobun, Peter. "Legends." **Huntsville Times**, 27 March 1977.
- Dickerson, George. "Albert Russel Erskine." **South Bend Tribune Sunday Magazine**, 22 April 1972.
- Digby, Edith. "More than 28,000 Buried in Maple Hill Cemetery." **Huntsville Times**, 16 July 1944.

SOURCES

- Frazier, Bill. "Paintings, Tribute to an Artist's Perseverence." **Huntsville Times**, 16 Aug. 1972.
- "A Gypsy Queen Buried Here." **Huntsville Times**, 4 Feb. 1988.
- Huntsville Times**, Sesquicentennial Issue, 11-17 Sept. 1955.
- Tatum, Dana. **Alabama Constitution**, Newsletter of Constitution Hall Park, Fall/Winter 1982.
- Tennessee Valley Bicentennial Year Times**, 8 Feb. 1976.

Other Sources:

- Bibb Family Records. Heritage Room, Huntsville Public Library.
- Clay Family Scrapbook. Heritage Room, Huntsville Public Library.
- Deed Book M, p. 30. Probate Records Room, Madison County Courthouse.
- Interviews with longtime residents of Madison County.
- King, Shelbie. "Thomas Fearn, the Man." Thesis, Univ. of Ala., Huntsville.
- Plat Book 1. Probate Records Room, Madison County Courthouse.

