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## Margaret Henson's Huntsville

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## MARGARET HENSON'S HUNTSVILLE

*The tornado of '89 reminds us that there is a spirit of Huntsville that in a moment's notice turns thousands of us into volunteers. That is our way, as Margaret Henson's Huntsville attests.*

The Panic of 1893 brought hard times to Huntsville, especially to the laboring class, and by 1895, there were many destitute families in town. Private donations and church charities were not enough to take care of all the needy, so a group of philanthropic people formed an organization called the United Charities.

The existing charities were pooled into this one big organization, much like our United Way of today, and committees were appointed. One committee convinced the Mayor and the Alderman that a city hospital, directed by United Charities,

was necessary. The city fathers arranged to rent a house on Mill Street, which is a little street between Holmes and Wheeler, and a City Hospital was opened June 12, 1895. Everyone in town was invited to the opening and asked to bring at least one useful item, such as a piece of china -- as a donation, of course. As far as we know, this was the first city hospital. There are very few records of it, but we believe it was strictly a charity hospital.

Another way United Charities eased the distress of the poor was to appoint committees to investigate needy cases that were reported to them. These committees indeed found deplorable situations. At one house, they found the mother dying, her eight children sick, and the father trying to take care of them all. There was no food

in the house whatsoever. The mother died two days later, but the children all lived, thanks to the United Charities. At another house, the mother, father, and seven children were all sick and starving, and there was only one bed which was a mattress filled with grass. Two of the children died, but the rest were saved. There were many families who needed help, but these two, it seems, were among the most pitiful.

Believe it or not, the city officials objected to United Charities' investigations because of the bad publicity for Huntsville. But fortunately, the women who were in charge of these investigations felt this was the most effective way to help the poor. They, being influential leaders in town, persevered in their endeavor and finally convinced the city fathers that not only was their way the best way to lend aid, but that the city must act to relieve crowded

conditions in the poverty stricken areas.

As far as recognizing the needs of others and wanting to help, times haven't changed much. But, it seems to me, that now, more men take active part in this type charity than they did back in the 1890's when they were willing to put up the money and let the women do the work.

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*Margaret Henson of the Public Library's Heritage Room is a Huntsville native and descendant of Thomas Bibb, second governor of Alabama. Margaret's informative talks prepared for radio, will now be featured in print.*



Photo Courtesy of The Huntsville Times