Tracy Pratt

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol15/iss1/7

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Tracy Wilder Pratt
(1861–1928)
If readers of this article were asked the question, "Which individuals do you believe were largely responsible for shaping Huntsville's course in the nineteenth century?" one suspects most answers would include LeRoy Pope, Thomas Fearn, Clement Clay, and other early leaders. This impression is derived from the amount of written material devoted to the city's ante-bellum years and the dearth of research on the latter part of the century. Moreover, if the question were redirected to include only the postbellum decades, the answers become somewhat complex owing to the influx of northern capitalists who helped to mold Huntsville into an important textile center by the early 1900's. In this light the individuals then cited might arguably include James and Michael O'Shaughnessy, William Wells, and Willard Wellman. But perhaps no individual exemplifies the progressive spirit of this era as does Tracy Pratt.

Historians have long detailed "the colonial economy of the Old South," dependent as it was on northern textile mills to spin its raw cotton into cloth. To remedy this situation and to emerge from the mire of Reconstruction, Southerners in the 1880's

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This article was condensed from a longer treatment of Tracy Pratt's life contained in Northern Dollars for Huntsville Spindles, Huntsville Planning Department, Huntsville, Alabama, and presented to the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society.
began to rally around the cry "bring the cotton mills to the cotton fields." From the period 1880 to 1910 the South attracted 10.7 million spindles; during the same period Alabama acquired 900,000 spindles and 15,000 looms. But to emulate the Yankee entrepreneur and industrialize the agrarian South entailed seeking money from outside the region, and Huntsville gratefully, however unwittingly, relied on the direction of two brothers from the North and three South Dakotans.

Michael J. O'Shaughnessy founded the Huntsville Cotton Oil Mills in 1881, and because of his enthusiastic support of the town, his brother James was attracted to the untapped potential of the region. In 1886 the brothers, along with eighteen prominent local citizens and two Memphis investors, organized the North Alabama Improvement Company to improve and develop the material resources of the area. Among the group's projects were the construction of the Monte Sano Hotel, modernization of the Huntsville Hotel, and, above all, securing the Dallas Mills for Huntsville. In 1892, for unknown reasons, the North Alabama Improvement Company in essence dissolved and sold their properties to the Northwestern Land Association, a South Dakota corporation. While some of the incorporators were Huntsvillian, three were not, and in the early 1890's these three made Huntsville their permanent home.

William S. Wells, a self-styled town builder from Pierre, South Dakota, died in 1900, thereby limiting his local contributions; nevertheless he was quite active during his residency and served as president of the Northwestern company. His obituary maintained that "by trade he was a druggist--
by adoption he was a banker, real estate agent, promoter, contractor, builder, stock raiser, and liveryman."

W. I. Wellman (1852-1922) served as president of the Farmers' & Merchants' Bank, chaired the state Republican Party, owned the Spring City Furniture Company in West Huntsville, and actively developed new subdivisions through the real estate firm of Boyd and Wellman. Apparently while still living in Pierre he linked up with Tracy Pratt.

Pratt was born in 1861 in Minnesota; his father was a bank clerk. Little is known of his early life or his business activities before his move to Huntsville; however, records from the University of Minnesota reveal he pursued a scientific course of study from 1878 to 1880 but apparently did not graduate. The cover of the 1890-91 Pierre City Directory cites Pratt and Wellman as proprietors of the Dakota Central Bank and sole owners of four additions to the City of Pierre. Another listing tells of the Pratt and Wellman Real Estate and Insurance Agency. By January of 1892 Wells, Wellman, and Pratt had decided to move to Huntsville. Two occurrences most likely prompted the translocation.

According to the Pratt family tradition, Pratt went to New York City to sell South Dakota school bonds and there met James O'Shaughnessy. O'Shaughnessy convinced Pratt of the economic opportunities Huntsville offered and described the improvement company's attempts to develop the town. An impressed Pratt returned to Pierre to then persuade his friends and associates.
Another theory is derived from a Chattanooga newspaper article which told of Wells’ desire to invest in the region. Twice during 1891, in February and December, Wells visited Huntsville and on both occasions met with James O’Shaughnessy. Either or both of these explanations may account for the South Dakotans’ decision to move southward.

A few months after Pratt’s arrival in Huntsville, he announced the formation of a new cotton mill for the town known as the West Huntsville Cotton Mills but often called the Coons and Pratt Mills. The building was constructed at the corner of 9th Avenue and 8th Street. Aside from the mill structure itself, Pratt and Coons provided housing and stores for the operatives as was customary.

Pratt was a tireless traveler throughout the country on Huntsville’s behalf, attempting to secure new industries for his adopted home. His efforts were richly rewarded. Early in 1899 the Merrimack Manufacturing Company (today Huntsville Manufacturing Company) announced plans to erect a mill with 200,000 spindles in West Huntsville. The local newspapers joyously credited its location to Tracy Pratt, who, aided by Wells, worked with Merrimack officials for eighteen months.

Once the Merrimack Company decided to build in Huntsville, a need arose for a streetcar system to link the Dallas and West Huntsville villages with Huntsville proper. Thus in July of 1899 the Huntsville Railway, Light & Power Company was organized. The capital stock was set at $100,000; of this amount Pratt invested $99,700. The effect of the system was quite far-reaching as it effectively opened up huge tracts of land for
residential development. The streetcar system made it practical for employees and shoppers to live beyond walking distance of the commercial section and, in fact, created the suburb as we know it today. Accordingly, new industries were more easily attracted to the benefits of Huntsville.

In 1900 Pratt was successful in securing Huntsville's fifth cotton mill, Lowe (later to become the Genesco plant and now part of Martin Industries) which located at 9th Avenue and Seminole Drive. For three years Pratt had negotiated with Arthur H. Lowe of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, to reach a final settlement. Later in the same year another plant, the Rowe Knitting Company, was secured for the city and again the credit went to Pratt. The plant manufactured cotton and woolen yarns, fabrics, and was located in West Huntsville on 9th Avenue and 10th Street. Much of Rowe's capital was supplied by New Yorkers.

The expansion of the textile industry, whether securing new mills or overseeing his own, was not Pratt's only interest. He generously donated much of his time and money to benevolent causes. One far-reaching society was the Heralds of Liberty organized in 1900 by Pratt, Wellman, and James R. Boyd. Aside from encouraging a general improvement in the moral character of its members, the enterprise was chartered as a life insurance company. A few years after its inception the main headquarters moved from Huntsville to Philadelphia, probably due to rapid growth. In 1925 the Heralds of Liberty became Liberty Life Assurance Society of Birmingham and today is known as the Liberty National Life Insurance Company.
Pratt's farsightedness is illustrated by two other diverse projects he undertook in the early years of this century. In May of 1905 talk of a Huntsville-Nashville railroad arose and Pratt was named chairman of the subscription committee. For the next three years he worked tirelessly on this project. Its importance was derived from the fact that there was no direct rail line running between the two cities. A direct line would open up the cities of the Northeast and Northwest for more convenient, more rapid, and cheaper transportation. In July of 1908 Pratt broke ground for the new railroad, but for unknown reasons, the road was never constructed. However, Pratt's other major endeavor of the period was successful.

Around 1905 the drilling of oil wells had begun in the vicinity of Hazel Green, but instead of oil, the wells struck natural gas. Pratt became interested, although it is not known whether he was acting alone or in conjunction with the New York-Alabama Oil Company (sometimes called the New York-Alabama Gas Company), a Delaware corporation in which he was active. An expert was brought in who advised the company to drill near the West Huntsville Cotton Mills, where gas was indeed discovered. By 1907 the corporation sought a franchise to furnish the City of Huntsville and its environs with natural gas.

The most attractive advantage of natural gas was its cost, which would result in savings on heating, lighting, and cooking. For example, a storekeeper in West Huntsville claimed he lit his store and house for a nickel per day. Cheap power was thus accessible to the common man as well as vaunted to the industrialist as an inducement for settling in this area.
It appears that the New York-Alabama Oil Company began searching about 1902 for oil and only later became interested in natural gas. In Madison County alone, the company negotiated about 185 leases (some for tracts of several hundred acres) which were broadly worded to allow the company to secure oil, gas, coal, or mineral rights. While this seemingly indicated financial stability, in 1914 the company merged with the Huntsville Gas, Light & Fuel Company to form the Huntsville Consolidated Gas Company. The reasons given to the New York-Alabama share­holders were a lack of capital and insufficient stock sales to continue operations.

Although Pratt was actively involved in 1907 with the proposed Huntsville-Nashville Railroad and the New York-Alabama Oil Company, those were not his only business dealings. In mid-1907 he was granted the franchise to erect and operate an electric railway and power plant for Bridgeport, Alabama. The railroad was to connect Bridgeport with Copenhagen, South Pittsburgh, Jasper, Huntsville, Scottsboro and Stevenson. The fate of this project is unknown.

In the following years Pratt continued his business affiliations and frequently traveled throughout the country to develop new opportunities for Huntsville, but it was 1914 before he engaged in another ambitious local project. It was in this year that the Allentown Power Company was incorporated in Florence, Alabama, with Pratt serving as president. The principal functions of the group were to construct hydroelectric dams on Cypress Creek near Florence and subdivide the adjacent property for summer homes. In addition, the company's charter provided for
the marketing of timber and minerals. The corporation existed only two months before consolidating with the Lauderdale Power Company which had been created to develop hydroelectric power along Shoals Creek. Since the two companies had been chartered for similar objectives, the merger seems logical. It is unknown what the company actually developed, but similar proposals to construct dams faced either congressional or presidential opposition.

In 1916, however, the federal government finally appropriated $20,000,000 for construction of a nitrate plant and dam for the Shoals area. Both projects had dual purposes; nitrates were used in munitions during wartime and in fertilizers during peacetime while Wilson Dam would facilitate navigation as well as produce electricity to run the nitrate plant. The boost these projects provided North Alabama is incalculable, and one of the leading advocates of this government undertaking was Pratt.

If Tracy Pratt were remembered only for bringing several cotton mills, the streetcar system, and natural gas to Huntsville, his role as a civic leader in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be preeminent. But of the corporation records for Madison County alone, Pratt's name appears as a subscriber to almost thirty organizations, although sometimes he owned only a single share. The scope of his investments was considerable, ranging from the Alabama Amusement Company, which operated motion picture theatres, to the Perfect Products Company, which manufactured oxalic acid. His name also appears as a charter member of benevolent societies, such as the Huntsville Christian Settlement Association, and civic groups, such as the
Tennessee Valley Fair Association and the Huntsville Golf and Country Club.

Pratt's local contributions reveal his diverse interests, but his business activities also extended to the state and national levels. A complete record of Pratt's investments may never be known because corporation records usually are filed with the county and state in which the business operates. Thus Pratt's participation in non-Alabama corporations could only be ascertained by checking with every probate judge and secretary of state in the country. Nevertheless some of his more ambitious ventures have come to light. His first was in 1900 with the formation of Buck & Pratt, a cotton commission business with offices in New York City. In the early twentieth century Pratt traveled to New York numerous times on personal business and also to promote Huntsville, and he soon became associated with the Southern Textile Company which was incorporated in 1903 with a capital stock of $14,000,000. Apparently the nature of the organization was to acquire southern textile mills and sell their goods through one commission house, possibly the firm of Buck & Pratt. The actual business of this enterprise is difficult to assess due to contradictions in local newspaper accounts; however, according to the New York Times, the corporation went bankrupt and was voided in New York for non-payment of taxes in 1907. This was not Pratt's only venture for 1903. That year he and Samuel Buck formed the Buck Coal & Coke Company with offices in South McAlester, Oklahoma (then in Indian Territory).

Probably due to his associations as director, vice-president and treasurer of the Southern Textile Company, Pratt moved to
New York City in April of 1904. Later in the year he contracted to purchase the Marlborough Hotel at Broadway and 36th Street. Perhaps the failure of the textile trust induced him to return to Huntsville, for by mid-1905 he was again living in the city.

Pratt's personal life also was filled with dramatic changes as he was married three times. In the early 1880's he married Jessie Ludlow (1866-1894) and they had three children: Albert (1884-c.1940), Lucille (1887-1894), and Leola (1890-c.1945). The oldest daughter Lucille lived in Huntsville only two years before her death at the family home on the bluff of Monte Sano, and a fortnight later the first Mrs. Pratt also died. Albert went to the Gold Rush in Alaska and disappeared; Leola married architect Thomas Carl Coleman. Pratt's second wife, Bertha Hughes Pratt whom he had married in 1903, died in 1923, and the following year Pratt wed Neide Humphrey of Huntsville. Before her marriage Miss Humphrey had received acclaim as an operatic singer, having debuted at Rome, Italy, and traveled throughout Europe and the United States. Their daughter Bess married John H. Wallace III and still resides in Huntsville.

Tracy Wilder Pratt died on October 29, 1928. His obituaries clearly elucidate his local influence:

It is generally agreed that he was responsible for more of the major industries locating in Huntsville than any other man who ever resided here, and he was often called 'Huntsville's First Citizen.'
He was a member of and identified with practically every civic, social, fraternal, patriotic, and business organization in Huntsville.

Out of respect for Pratt, all businesses in Huntsville ceased operations for five minutes at the onset of his funeral.

The most interesting Tracy Pratt story comes from a July 4, 1915, parade and celebration. Pratt had organized the events and was much surprised when local businessmen presented him with a loving cup inscribed: "As a loving testimonial of our exalted esteem, this cup is presented by the Citizens of Huntsville to Tracy W. Pratt, whose energy, thrift, and progress have made him a loyal benefactor to be remembered in the days to come as the man who made Huntsville." Indeed he almost single-handedly did during the early part of the twentieth century.

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