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HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM MOVES FORWARD WITH
DEDICATION OF TWO NEW MARKERS

F. Alex Luttrell, III

The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society is continuing its program to erect markers at sites of historical significance throughout the county. Begun by the Alabama Historical Association in 1951, the highway marker program quickly spread to Madison County. The local society erected its first marker in 1953, and since that time has been the driving force in ensuring that Madison County residents and visitors alike are made aware of the many interesting and historically significant sites in the area. During the more than 40-year history of the marker program, the local society has received financial assistance from the Madison County Commission, local municipalities, civic organizations, and private citizens. Recent funding from the City of Huntsville has enabled the society to erect several new markers during the past year. One is located at the site of the William Hooper Councill School on St. Clair Avenue, while a second marker was placed in the Old Town Historic District.

The two newest markers were recently erected on Oakwood Avenue to commemorate the sites of Dallas/Optimist Park and Dallas Mills & Village/Rison School. These markers were officially unveiled and dedicated in ceremonies held on July 30, 1995. Led by Mr. Douglas J. Parker of the Northeast Huntsville Civic Association, the marker dedication ceremonies highlighted the significance of the Dallas Mill area and its residents to the entire City of Huntsville. Members of the community assembled at 2:00 p.m. in Optimist Park to witness the dedication of the first marker. A brief history of Dallas/Optimist Park was recalled by Mr. Parker prior to introducing the special guests, members of the Huntsville Dr. Peppers, a women's softball team, who played at the park from 1937 through 1943. The park, built in 1928, initially served as the baseball field for the semi-pro Dallas Mill teams coached by H.E. "Hub" Myhand, Huntsville's "Mr. Baseball." During its heyday, semi-pro baseball featuring local mill teams drew loyal crowds of up to 6,000 fans. In 1949 the Optimist Club purchased and lighted the park, where Leroy McCollum's Huntsville Boosters played from 1950 until 1953. Optimist Park, one of the few early ballparks to open to all races, was used during the 1950s and 1960s for exhibition games by the Birmingham Black Barons and other Negro League teams. In 1994, the City of Huntsville renovated and re-opened Optimist Park, where Huntsville youth can once again be seen enjoying their favorite pastime.

Following the Dallas/Optimist Park dedication ceremony, the crowd walked the short distance along Oakwood Avenue to the Dallas Mills & Village/Rison School marker located in front of the city fire station. Dallas Mills, chartered by T. B. Dallas, began operation in 1892 as Alabama's largest cotton mill. The



Dallas (Optimist) Park Marker --West Side View
Photograph courtesy of Jeanne Smith



Alex Luttrell, Joyce Smith, and Winston Walker at the Rison School Marker
Photograph courtesy of Jeanne Smith

mill village extended from Oakwood Avenue south to O'Shaughnessy Avenue, and from Coleman Street west to Dallas Street. The mill village included homes, churches, a medical facility, a library, a lodge building, a YMCA, and schools. The mill continued to operate until 1949. During the ceremony, Mr. Woodrow W. Chisam spoke of the grand times and influential leaders of Rison School. Built in 1921 and named for mill general manager Archie L. Rison, the school soon became the hub of village social life. Mr. Cecil Fain served as principal for 31 years prior to the closing of the school in 1964.

At each dedication ceremony, Mr. Alex Luttrell, Chairman of the Marker Committee, accepted the marker on behalf of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. He then presented the markers to Mrs. Joyce Smith, a member of the Executive Committee of the Alabama Historical Association and also a member of the local society. Each ceremony closed with a benediction given by Brother Herman E. Schrimsher, deacon of the Jackson Way Baptist Church.

Several new markers will be erected and dedicated in the coming months. A marker noting the existence of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company & Village/Bradley School will soon be installed on Triana Boulevard in front of Phase IV Systems. Another marker will be placed at the Weeden House Museum on Gates Avenue. A third marker is scheduled to be re-erected near the site of the Monte Sano Female Seminary at the intersection of Lookout Drive and Fearn Street.

With work on these markers nearly complete, the Marker Committee has now turned its attention to researching the history and writing the text for other historical sites within the county. The committee recently compiled and prioritized a list of some 40 proposed markers. The five sites chosen for work during the coming year include: Oakwood College, Echols Hill, Glenwood Cemetery, Temple B'nai Sholom, and Monte Sano Hotel. The committee is also working with governmental agencies and local civic organizations to securing funding for the erection of these future markers.

A publication containing information on each of the more than 50 historical markers in Madison County is scheduled for publication in early 1996. This booklet will include a brief history of the county, maps to locate each marker, current and historical photographs of the sites, references to additional published information on the sites, as well as the complete text that appears on each marker. The book should be a welcome addition to the library of anyone interested in local history.