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# **THE HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL REVIEW**

**Summer-Fall 1997**

Volume 24

No. 2

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**The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society**

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of the  
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THE HUNTSVILLE MADISON COUNTY BOTANICAL GARDEN  
1979 -1997  
“A JEWEL IN HUNTSVILLE’S CROWN”

by

Harvilee Phillips Harbarger

Recent history can be equally interesting as the ancient past. The following is an account, largely chronological, of how one of the brightest jewels in Huntsville’s Crown, the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden, came into existence.

In December, 1979, fourteen people met with the sole purpose of establishing a botanical garden in Huntsville, Alabama. This far-sighted group--Nell Bragg, Drucilla Esslinger, Harvilee Harbarger, Henry Joiner, Gail Kelly, Grady Kennedy, Evelyn Lucas, Duane Miller, Garry Murray, Ellie Salopez, Donald Saxton, Margaret Saxton, Mary Ann Terry, and Rosa Belle VanValkenburgh--became the founders of the garden. The first official meeting of the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden Society was held in January, 1980. Garry Murray was elected the first president, by-laws were drafted, and working committees were established.

In March, 1980, articles of incorporation were filed, and the Society was duly organized as a non-profit corporation under the provisions of the Alabama Non-Profit Corporation Act (Act 578, Regular Session 1955; Chapter 10, Sections 203-263 of Title 10, *Code of Alabama*, 1940). The Garden was incorporated in the County of Madison (Corporation. Book 58, pages 1041-1047).

In March, 1981, the Society was recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as an organization exempt from federal income taxes under section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It was determined that the Society was an organization as described in sections 170 (B)(1)(A)(vi) and 509 (A)(1). Therefore, contributions to the Society were declared deductible as provided in section 170 of the Code.

The 112-acre site which the Garden occupies was provided by the U.S. Army through the Alabama Space Science Commission and the City of Huntsville. This land, located on the northeast corner of Redstone Arsenal was originally part of the Arsenal reservation owned by the U.S. Army, and was transferred by deed (and an Act of Congress) from the Department of the Army to the Alabama Space Science Exhibit Commission (ASSEC) in February, 1981. One of the covenants of the deed states that the land must be used for recreational and educational purposes. A remarkable site, the land combines both typical lowland and highland forest and gently rolling meadows as well as an unusual bog area.

Beginning the second year, in 1982, Grady Kennedy was elected as President of the Society. Meetings were held, ideas for the garden were exchanged, and in January, 1983, the Society recommended to the City of Huntsville that the future Botanical Garden be established on the property leased to the city from the ASSEC. During the months that followed, many hours were spent developing a concept plan for the Botanical Garden. This was completed in September, 1983, by Harbarger Landscape Design, Inc.; Harvillee Harbarger ASLA and Julie Harbarger Stephens ASLA were the principle designers. John Martz, local artist and draftsman, contributed his talents to the plan. These plans and perspectives for the first 35 acres of development were presented as a gift to the Garden.

Upon the resignation of Grady Kennedy in October, 1984, vice-president Evelyn Lucas became president of the Society. Mrs. Lucas was subsequently elected to two full terms in office. During her tenure the Garden began to take shape. Julie Stephens and Garry Murray rode on the front of a road grader provided by the Madison County Commission and directed where the roads would be in this initial phase. Then, in October, 1985, Huntsville Mayor Joe Davis, Madison County Commission Chairman Mike Gillespie, representatives from the U.S. Army and Garden Society members gathered on the site to plant the first new tree, a Southern Magnolia, to celebrate dedication and groundbreaking.

By June, 1986, an Executive Director was hired to provide full-time coordination of the development effort. Phase One plans were finalized to include specific plantings so that the Garden could begin to take shape. The various support groups interested in the plan, such as iris, rose, day lily, herb, and wildflower, were all becoming actively involved in planting their designated areas.

Mrs. Jerry (Butch) Damson assumed the position of President of the Botanical Garden Society in January 1987, and the initial fencing of the property was completed. During the two years of Butch Damson's presidency, her enthusiasm and energy propelled membership growth and activity. Many projects were accomplished, such as an annual plant sale, and artist Sallie B. Cobb was commissioned to create the first print/poster to be used in fund raising. A Board of Advisors was formed with Roy Nichols as the first chairman, and the first phases of the Rose Garden and the Herb Garden were completed.

Because of Huntsville's involvement with putting a man on the moon, the Society decided on a goal of specifically incorporating into its world class Botanical Garden a space/high technology theme, reflecting the spirit of the community. During this time Robert Montgomery resigned as the first Executive Director of the Garden to accept another position, and Al Privette was hired in August, 1987, as horticulture and site manager. The first portion of the

irrigation system was completed, and the Nature Trail/Wildflower Garden was established.

During this time the Madison County Committee of the U.S. Constitutional Bicentennial Commission, headed by past Madison County Commission Chairman James Record, began planning a project known as Constitution Walk. There fifty-five maple trees, donated by members, were planted as a living memorial to the fifty-five signers of the U.S. Constitution.

Continuing this exciting and busy time in the Garden, work was initiated on the Day Lily Garden, Iris Garden, Turf Plots, and meadows. All Phase One roads were upgraded, and approximately 10,000 daffodil bulbs were planted along an interior roadway. Contracts were let for the entrance road, parking lot, pond and drainage, and sanitary sewer installations. With all of this progress Mayor Joe Davis, the City Council, and the Alabama Space Science Exhibit Commission approved building plans so work could begin on the Administration Building. Looking to future development, the Garden employed the services of the firm Environmental Planning and Design of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, to develop a master plan for the entire 112 acres.



The administration building



The Garden Guild was organized as a support group, and immediately became active in raising funds to benefit all aspects of the garden. The money raised by these energetic volunteers was used for basic needs, and their activities continue to provide much needed support.

On May 21, 1988, the Garden was opened to the public; in August of that year a mission statement was adopted, and the Founders' Dinner held at the Von Braun Civic Center was a great success. Bill Snoddy succeeded Butch Damson as president in March, 1989, and proceeded to lead the Garden's development in accordance with its mission statement: "Our Garden will achieve world class recognition by balancing year-round botanical displays, strong educational programs and specialized research showcased with high technology. The unique aspect of our Garden will be the building of traditional botanical garden elements, the aesthetic heritage of our region, the conservation of natural resources, and our thrust into space and the future."

April, 1989, brought springtime to the Garden and the opening and dedication of Constitution Walk was held, with Governor Guy Hunt in attendance. Phase One was completed, and the master planner Geoffrey L. Rausch discussed future plans with the Board. Completion of the Administration/Education Building was celebrated with a plant sale, Founders Appreciation Party, and a Spring Festival. At this time the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) held an impressive flag-pole dedication ceremony.

Many functions involving hundreds of Garden members were held including the first biennial tour of Huntsville's Elegant Gardens. Two rare black Australian swans were donated by swan breeder Mark Jones to become residents on the pond, and a contest to name the swans was won by William I. Dale who named the elegant birds Flora and Fauna. They were a topic of conversation and objects of observation enjoyed by all until their demise, caused it was determined, by night mauling wildlife.

Since the Garden was mandated to be used as a tool for learning, a botanical presentation was set up in the city and county schools. Speakers for this program were Garden volunteers. When school opened in 1989, the programs were given, on site, in the Garden where each fifth grade class in the city and county schools was given a docent-guided tour of Phase One of the Garden. These tours are annual events, and are a regularly scheduled field trip on the school calendar.

*Southern Living* magazine sponsored a show house fund raiser. The Garden Guild Fall Flower Show, held at the Von Braun Civic Center, attracted participants from all over the north Alabama area. Because volunteers were and continue to be such a vital part of the Garden, all volunteers were recognized at the first volunteer recognition party. A support greenhouse was installed to be managed by the maintenance crew.

Recycling became a focus as the Garden joined with the city to become pioneers in recycling leaves collected in the fall. The city's collections trucks stockpile leaves at the garden's mulch area where they become valuable soil amendments through natural composting. Each year between March and October, the city provides a front-end loader on Saturday mornings to load mulch into individuals' trucks. There is no fee for this mulch, although donations are accepted and appreciated, with all donations going directly to support the Garden. This program has been recognized as a success, and plays a vital role in the city's waste management program while providing an important resource to local gardeners. After Christmas each year, Christmas trees are collected at various locations in the city, brought to the Garden, shredded, and added to the mulch pile.

At the annual membership meeting in March, 1990, Roy J. Nichols was installed as president, and the new president held a reception to introduce the new Executive Director, Gary Paul. For accounting purposes, the Botanical Garden went from a calendar year to a fiscal year (October - September) to coincide with the City of Huntsville's fiscal year. On June 14, 1990, an agreement between the City and the Garden was signed by Mayor Steve Hettinger and City Council President Ernest Kaufmann, acknowledging that the Garden would utilize 112 acres of property

Cornucopia, a fall festival, which includes plant sales, art shows, hand-made crafts, children's shows, family entertainment featuring local talent, hay rides, food and fun was introduced in 1990. It has become a regular October event in the Garden.

More room was needed for office space and educational programs, so the educational annex was purchased and erected with contributions in labor and money from the membership. A resolution to adopt and approve the Master Plan was approved in December, 1991, and by April, 1992, a Capital Campaign began to implement Phase One of the Master Plan.

The first Camp Botanica got under way in 1992 with forty children enrolled in the week-long sessions. Contracts were signed to build the Center for Biospheric Educational Research (CBER) and the Central Corridor Gardens, both parts of the Master Plan. The Garden was working closely with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to develop a high technology and space theme, and an agreement was approved with NASA and the Marshall Space Flight Center for acceptance of a space node to be placed in the Center for Biospheric Education and Research. During this time the resignation of Gary Paul, Executive Director, was accepted, and Jack Charlton was approved by the Board as Acting Director.



The Corridor Garden

During Nichols' term, the pace was fast and the true shape of the Garden was coming together. A Huntsville native, Harvey Cotten, was approved as the new Executive Director in November 1992. During this period of rapid growth, a full site Master Plan was approved by the City Planning Commission, a kick-off breakfast for a \$1.5 million Capital Campaign was held, and the Horticulture and Site Development Committee was authorized to proceed with bids for the Center for Biospheric Educational Research building and the Corridor Garden hardscape. This phase in the life of the Garden moved along with the increasing interest of members, the hard work of numerous volunteers, and the leadership of Cotten. Groundbreaking Ceremonies were held for CBER and the Corridor Gardens.

Since home composting had become an important part of the waste management issues facing the country, the Botanical Garden took a leading role in educating the public on the benefits and mechanics of composting as well as the mechanics. Al Privette, Director of Horticulture at the Garden, research and designed the compost demonstration area, located adjacent to the Vegetable Demonstration Garden. Currently the Garden is offering the classes which an individual must complete in order to receive a compost bin from the city. This activity is part of the city's solid waste program. Classes are scheduled

: The Huntsville Historical Review, Vol 24, No 2, Summer 1997-Fall through the Clean Community Office, and have been full at every session. The City reports a decrease in the quantity of garbage picked up since the compost program began.

When Madison County's third courthouse was demolished in 1964, the twenty limestone columns that were the main feature of the structure were salvaged and stored. The columns were moved to the Garden in 1985 to be used for future development. Three of these columns were used in the design of the entrance to the Garden on Bob Wallace Avenue which was built in 1991. The remaining sections are to be used in future garden designs.



The Garden's main entrance with columns from the third Madison County Courthouse

The Garden continued to grow and expand, and with Bill Snoddy as president, a giant step was taken when he presided over a ribbon cutting ceremony for the opening of the Center for Biospheric Educational Research in September 1994. Loretta Spencer became the Garden's fifth president, and served to keep the garden growing from September 1994 to September 1996.

The Fern Glade in the Garden was growing well, and the Fern Society completed landscaping, by adding a water feature to its site. Ferns were propagating well enough to offer some for sale, with funds going to support upkeep of the Glade. The original Rose Garden was renovated and the Rose Society planted five hundred new rose bushes.

The entire community rallied to save a one-hundred-year-old dogwood tree (*Cornus Florida*) that was to be destroyed during the widening of Old Madison Pike. City and county services, volunteers and school children all over the city and county played vital roles in saving this beautiful tree by moving it to a place of honor in the Garden. This is just one more example of all the combined efforts taken to make the Garden a reality. It is truly “everybody’s Garden.”

The Day Lily Garden was designated as a test garden and a display garden by the American Hemerocallis Society. Fund raisers including the Annual Plant Sale, were all successful and new membership categories were introduced. Butch Damson consented to lead the Botanical Garden by serving another term as president, and was duly installed at the annual meeting in September, 1996.

Plans for the first Galaxy of Lights (a Christmas fantasy) were begun. The Christmas Galaxy of Lights involving hundreds of hours of volunteer time to install the electrical displays and to staff the attraction which was open to the public from Thanksgiving through New Year’s Eve attracted thousands of visitors to see the lighting extravaganza..

Future plans include the enlargement of educational and meeting facilities and an exciting new project--a constructed wetland. A constructed wetland is, in lay terms, a biological system that can take effluents from a septic tank and through natural processes treat or clean the waste and return it safely to the environment. Systems like this have been in use in this country for ten years; however, the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden is proposing to build one totally new and unique. This reciprocating constructed wetland system is state-of-the-art technology developed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. When installed, it will be the first of its kind in use at a public facility in the United States.

Since breaking ground in the 1980s, Huntsville’s Botanical Garden has become one of the most active and dynamic gardens in the country. Membership has grown from 454 in the early years to 3,125 single and family memberships in 1997.

Within the Garden today, the natural beauty of the site has been enhanced with the development of various gardens, rolling meadows, and acres of open tended lawn. Paths meander through the shady stands of native trees of the Dogwood Trail, and native wildflowers pop up and surprise visitors as they stroll through the Nature Trail that leads to the Fern Glade and the Shade Garden. The newly renovated Rose Garden is located on a knoll overlooking the Reflecting Pond and Constitution Walk. The Vegetable Demonstration Garden and the compost demonstration area are the beginnings of a Home Demonstration Garden. The Herb Garden with its raised brick planters is a very popular place for visitors.

The Central Corridor Gardens flow over five acres and comprise three theme gardens: the Perennial Garden, the Aquatic Garden, and the Annual Garden. The Perennial Garden provides a constant display of color and texture throughout the year. The Aquatic Pavilion is the heart of the Aquatic Garden, with fountains in front and large peaceful pool in the rear, full of water plants. To the west the Summer House surrounded by beds of dazzling color comprise the Annual Garden. Many weddings are held throughout the year in these attractive areas.



Aquatic Garden and Pavillion

The Garden created a link between Huntsville's high technology community, the space program, and the leading industries that have contributed so much to the city's growth and success. This link became a focus on biospherics--the study of close ecological systems. The first phase of CBER is devoted to public education dealing with the principles associated with biospherics. This is presented through exhibits such as the Biosphere Earth Exhibit, a fourteen-foot sphere that serves as a circular projection screen for an audio-visual presentation on the thin layer of life surrounding the planet earth. A full-size Space Station Node comprises the Demonstration Lunar Greenhouse in which visitors are shown how plants may be grown on the lunar surface using hydroponics. This focus on biospherics reveals the much greater role plants play in human environments than the practical and aesthetic value often portrayed in botanical gardens.

Finally, the dreams and plans of the original fourteen visionaries have come to fruition. Along the way, many others have been and continue to be involved. In

a project of this magnitude, heated debate and uneasy compromises often were necessary to produce the consensus which led to the garden's ultimate success. The true strengths of the Garden lie in the work of its many volunteers and its dedicated staff. These volunteers serve as officers and board members, on the Advisory Board, in the educational programs, in the Garden Guild, and in the individual garden societies. There are many who serve on committees, who plan and support the fund raisers, who labor in the garden and on building projects, and who provide financial support. All of these continued and combined efforts have made the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden become a Garden "of the people, by the people and for the people."

ALBERT RUSSEL ERSKINE

by

David Byers

The name ALBERT RUSSEL ERSKINE is familiar to Huntsvillians, since it was also the name of Huntsville's largest and finest hotel for over forty years--the Russel Erskine. Very few men who were born and reared in Huntsville, Alabama, made their mark on the world as did Erskine. From a small-town beginning, he prospered, lived, dined, danced, and built with the elegant and wealthiest Americans of the early twentieth century. "He was a man of tremendous ambition, energy and talent; a self-made man in every sense of the word."<sup>1</sup>

Albert Russel Erskine was born on January 24, 1871, the son of William Michael Erskine and Ursula Ragland Erskine. He attended Huntsville schools, both public and private, until he was fifteen years old. His first business venture was selling red apples to passengers on trains as they stopped at the station. He was persuaded to drop out of school by an opportunity to work for the railroad as an office boy for \$15 per month. In a short period, that salary grew to the unbelievable sum of \$65 per month when he was appointed chief bookkeeper.

Through railroad contacts, he was offered a job with the American Cotton Company of St. Louis, Missouri, and when he was 27 he moved there and worked as the chief clerk. As in every job he held, promotions came quickly, and in a few years he was the general auditor with oversight of 300 cotton gins scattered across the cotton-growing south. When American Cotton went into receivership in 1904, he quickly found a position as treasurer and member of the board of directors of Yale and Town Lock Company, hardware manufacturers. Following that job, he was a vice-president and member of the board of directors of Underwood Typewriter Company in 1910 and 1911.

Then, though he had little formal education, real opportunity knocked. On the advice of a banker friend who told him of an opening for an executive with knowledge of financing and cost accounting, he joined the Studebaker Corporation for an annual salary of \$20,000. He became treasurer and a member of the executive board of directors of Studebaker in South Bend, Indiana, in October of 1911. Four years later, he was president of the company.

His ability to organize, envision the future, promote his ideas, and build enthusiasm for projects was effectively used to direct the old Studebaker Corporation from a builder of horse-drawn carriages through wartime manufacturing of the country's military needs, and on to production of modern

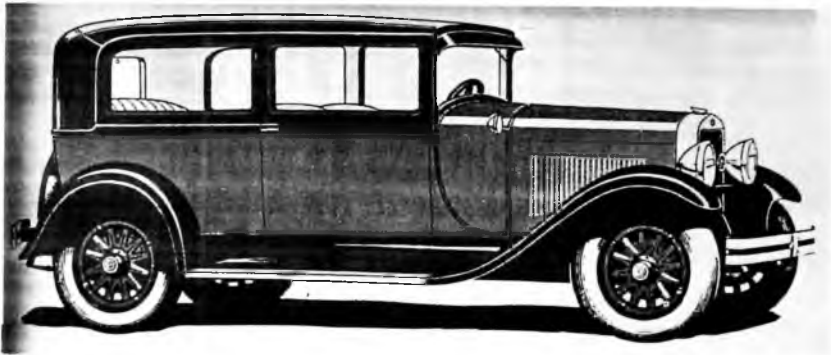




Portrait of Russel Erskine, courtesy of the Huntsville Art Museum

automobiles. His managerial genius and intense focus on the financial side might have allowed the engineering segment of the business to slip, and Studebaker lost some of its best engineering talent after World War I. Erskine's strengths came to the attention of America's business leaders when, during the economic retrenchment in 1921, Studebaker continued to grow at a rate of 30 per cent.

A visit to major automobile manufacturers in Europe in 1924 brought the birth of a new idea, a new car made for that market. It would be small, trim, refined in detail, and would combine precision workmanship with American automobile traits of durability, power, and performance. When the automobile, called the Erskine, was introduced in October of 1926, it was the sensation of the Paris Automobile Show. However, the American automobile-buying public was not as impressed as were other worlds of car fanciers; no European market developed, and the several models of the Erskine failed to make a profit for the company. After the 1930 changes made little difference in sales, and because economic conditions were worsening, the elegant model was dropped.<sup>2</sup>



The 1929 Model 52 Erskine Club Sedan

While leading the automobile manufacturing company, Erskine was also president of the Pierce Arrow Company and the S.P.A. Truck Corporation. He was an important man in South Bend, serving as president of the lay trustees of Notre Dame University, on the city planning commission, the beautification committee, and as a member of the board of directors of a local bank. He was a director of the Chicago Federal Reserve Board.

Erskine established an agency to benefit motorists and pedestrians around the country. It was called the Albert Russel Erskine Bureau for Street Traffic Research at Harvard, a forerunner of the American Automobile Association. He was active in raising funds for projects he deemed important such as the hospital and the Y.M.C.A.

A street which was named for him is still an important thoroughfare in South Bend. Erskine developed a major residential project of 600 acres on the south edge of the city. On these wooded and rolling hills he built his palatial home which was called Twyckenham Hills Estate. At his wife's death, the house was purchased by the Sisters of Holy Cross who converted it to Moreau Manor. A school called St. Mary's Academy for Girls operated on the site until it was closed in 1976. The property was purchased in the early 1980s for redevelopment by the Erskine Manor Associates.

Erskine was a sportsman; his favorite game was golf. Often called a "fact fanatic," he said, "Golf is a methodical game based on facts, which can beat much younger opponents who rely on skill."<sup>3</sup> Today a map of South Bend shows Erskine hills, a 120-acre public golf course which he built as part of his residential development, and then in 1925 donated it to the city of South Bend. He established an annual national award for the best college football team, selected by twenty sportswriters from around the country. Each year the winning coach was given a large gold cup, the Albert Russel Erskine award. He said, "The coach is responsible for welding together a championship outfit."<sup>4</sup>

In 1903 Erskine married 27-year-old Annie Garland Lyell of Huntington, West Virginia. During her life in South Bend, she was known for her quiet and retiring disposition. She loved to play the piano, and no one was allowed to disturb her while she played. Although she belonged to no clubs and seldom entertained, she was known as an extremely charitable and democratic person. In 1933 she was awarded the Order of Haller's Swords, a tribute from the government of Poland for her financial contributions during World War I to aid the formation of a Polish army from America.<sup>5</sup> She died on August 30, 1938. Her brother, James Garland, was a vice-president of Erskine's Twyckenham Land and Investment Company. Her \$40,000 estate was left to her brothers and nephews.<sup>6</sup>

A son, Albert Russel Erskine, called "Russ" and sometimes listed as Jr., born in 1909, was adopted by the Erskines at the age of six. In 1983, while living in Battle Creek, Michigan, with his second wife, Janet, he returned to South Bend and the Erskine mansion at the request of new owners to advise them on redecorating. He remembered his life there while growing up as lonely, but wonderful at times. "I never thought that I was living in a great mansion when I was a boy; it was just home."<sup>7</sup>

The senior Albert Russel Erskine was descended from hardy stock. His maternal great-grandfather was Albert Russel, born in Pennsylvania on May 25, 1755, the fourth of six sons, who served in the Revolutionary War for seven years. He entered as a private and was promoted through the ranks to colonel. He married four times; his third wife, Ann Frances Hooe, was great-grandmother of Albert Russel Erskine. In 1816, Albert Russel moved to Huntsville with his fourth wife, Lockey Henderson Russel, a widow from Sumner County, Tennessee, whom he had married in 1811. He purchased Russel Hill Farm on the western outskirts of the city (now near the Butler High School campus) where he lived out his days. He is buried in Maple Hill Cemetery.<sup>8</sup>

Another hardy pioneer ancestor, great-grandmother Margaret Hanley Paulee Erskine, born February 28, 1753, told harrowing tales of a September 1779 attack by Shawnee Indians which occurred in Monroe County, Virginia, now West Virginia, while they were moving to Kentucky. Her husband and child were murdered and she was taken prisoner and spent three years with the Indians. She was relatively unharmed as the property of an old chief, White Bark. A Mr. Higgins who traded with the Indians, attempted on several occasions to barter for her, but White Bark refused to discuss release. After the chief's death, Mr. Higgins bought her freedom from a son of the chief for 200 American dollars.<sup>9</sup> Margaret Paulee began life again, married Henry Erskine, had another family, and lived to be 90 years of age at her death in June of 1842.

Albert Russel Erskine's grandfather, Dr. Alexander Erskine, son of Margaret Paulee Erskine, played an important role in his time. Born in Huntsville on April 11, 1791, he studied there, then in Georgetown, DC, and at West Point, New York, for two years, and graduated with honor at the University of Pennsylvania medical school. It is said he was a brilliant student, having "learned the Presbyterian principles, the shorter Catechism, so thoroughly he could begin at the end and ask himself the questions and answers backwards to the beginning without error or fault."

Dr. Erskine married Susan Catherine Russel on June 28, 1820, and began their life at 515 Franklin Street in Huntsville. The house was owned by Robert Fearn, brother to Dr. Thomas Fearn, and was later purchased by the Erskines. Susan Catherine Russel Erskine was "noted for her grace, culture and beauty." She was especially well educated and had "recited before President Monroe, LaFayette, and General Jackson." This greatly admired beauty had "circumnavigated the world from Massachusetts Bay." She and her doctor husband had eleven children, with William Michael Erskine, father of Albert Russel Erskine, the youngest.

For a short time Dr. Alexander Erskine practiced medicine in Huntsville with Dr. Edmund Irby, then formed a partnership with Dr. Thomas Fearn in

November, 1851. Both Fearn and Erskine were forward-looking doctors. They gave, with remarkable success, “the first sedative dose of sulphate of quinine as a treatment for intermittent, remittent, and continuous fevers.” He was a doctor of “sound and discriminating judgment” and “served in consultation through a radius of 100 miles.” He had a “successful clinical practice and surgery, excelling as an obstetrician.” “He never lost a case where he had entire management and supervision of it from the commencement.”

“An uncompromising Whig of the Henry Clay school,” he was a peacemaker and a man of “large public spirit.” Late in his career, he worked with his wife’s brother, Dr. Albert Russel, Jr. and then with his oldest son, Dr. Albert Russel Erskine. He died of cancer at age 66;<sup>10</sup> he and his wife are buried in Maple Hill Cemetery.

A confusing puzzle occurs when the same family names are used over and over for generations and even within the same generation. John Rison Jones, Jr., a noted Huntsville historian, has pointed out this problem with the Erskines. In this family there were six Albert Russel Erskines born between 1827 and 1911.

1. Dr. Albert Russel Erskine, 1827-1903.
2. Albert Russel Erskine, 1857-1934, the son of #1.
3. Albert Russel Erskine, 1871-1933, the grandson of Dr. Alexander Erskine and the subject of this article.
4. Albert Russel Erskine, born 1882, the nephew of #1 and the son of Alexander O. Erskine, #1’s brother.
5. Albert Russel Erskine, Jr., born 1909, adopted son of #3.
6. Albert Russel Erskine, 1911-1993, the son of #2 and the great-grandson of #1. He had a successful career as an editor for Random House publishers, working with James Michener, William Faulkner, John O’Hara, and Robert Penn Warren.<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1920s an enthusiastic group of Huntsville businessmen decided this sleepy cotton town needed a showplace hotel. Local leaders who formed the Huntsville Hotel Company, Inc. were Robert Schiffman, L.B. Goldsmith, M.M. Hutchens, R.E. Smith, J.E. Pierce, and T.T. Terry, along with W.M. Stanley of Birmingham. Unsuccessful efforts to raise adequate capital locally led to the idea of an appeal to Huntsville’s noted and successful, former, but still well-connected, citizen, Russel Erskine. He agreed to participate, but with certain demands. Plans had been made to name the hotel for General Joe Wheeler, a Confederate officer from the North Alabama area, but Erskine required that the name be “the Russel Erskine Hotel.” He did buy stock, one of 55 investors, but not as much as the builders had hoped. He owned one hundred shares at \$100 each, about 5.6% of the total sold.



Russel Erskine Hotel

The magnificent hotel was opened in 1930, the tallest and finest within 100 miles.<sup>12</sup> A large portrait of Russel Erskine which hung in the opulent lobby is now a part of the Huntsville Art Museum's permanent collection. The 12-story hotel served the city splendidly with ballrooms, restaurant, and 150 guest rooms with "circulating ice water and electric fans" until the 1980s when it closed and was converted to apartments for assisted living.

Under Erskine's leadership, the Studebaker Corporation continued making progress even in the early years of the nation's great economic depression. But by 1933, with the situation worsening, Studebaker went into receivership and Erskine into deep depression. He was 63 years old and his health was failing. Headlines in the *South Bend Tribune* on July 2, 1933, read, "Nervous System Shattered, Manufacturer Wrote Before Taking Own Life With Gun."

In an amazingly detailed article, the suicide was described. "Mr. Erskine lay upon a rug on the bathroom floor, the death weapon at his right hand. He was attired in the trousers of his pajamas, having removed the jacket. Across his body he had placed a towel, firing the shot through the towel which was scorched by the powder as the bullet plowed through to the heart and lodged in the back." ... "The revolver had been in Mr. Erskine's possession for some time." ... "The revolver was of United States manufacture containing five chambers, all loaded except the chamber that had been discharged." Erskine had owned the revolver as a protective weapon, since, according to the police, he had received "threatening letters."

Three notes were found in his dressing room. One addressed to his son merely said:

"Russel --  
I cannot go on any longer.  
Devotedly, A.R.E."

A postscript to this note asked that the funeral services be strictly private and devoid of flowers. A second note was for his personal physician, Dr. R.L. Sensenich, and simply said, "My nerves are shattered. You will understand." The third note was addressed to business associates, Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Feltes, in which he requested they take charge of the funeral arrangements.<sup>13</sup>

On July 5, 1933, *The South Bend Tribune* reported:

"...His self-inflicted death is attributed to his worries over his declining health and the troubles overshadowing his personal and corporate interests. Economic misfortunes had taken a heavy toll upon the wealth he had accumulated in 20 years with the Studebaker Corporation and when the establishment went into the hands of receivers last March, he lost his control over its interests. Some of his closest friends said that his pride and spirit had been crushed by the tide of adversity that had overtaken him in the past three years."

The family followed Erskine's wishes for a private service in every detail. The Reverend C. T. Ballie of the First Presbyterian Church read the funeral service and selections from scripture. There was no eulogy. Names of guests were checked by a policeman before mourners were allowed to enter. Visitors to the Twyckenham Park home included many who were made wealthy by the Studebaker empire during the Erskine period. A long list of America's industrial giants attended the funeral services. Among them were the Harvey Firestones, senior and junior, heads of the Akron, Ohio, rubber company, and Albert Lasker, Chicago advertising executive. Three former presidents of Notre Dame University were also in attendance.

After the brief services at the Erskine home, the funeral procession drove less traveled streets to the Highland Cemetery. His body was held in the memorial vault at that cemetery until it was removed to Huntsville for burial. The offices and plants of Studebaker were closed, but because the family wished no public display, the businesses of the city did not close. The Chamber of Commerce and the Associated South Bend Merchants adopted resolutions of condolence.<sup>14</sup>

The Erskine estate was generally estimated to be between \$12 and \$15 million. The will, dated June 17, 1933, left two-thirds to his widow, one-third to his son. Because of gifts and debts, the actual amount was not quickly determined. *The South Bend Tribune* later reported discord among the three administrators of the estate. "Cash assets amount to \$27,275, with receipts of \$198,880 against disbursements of \$171,604." Significant amounts were due as federal inheritance taxes and executor's fees. Affairs of the land development company were involved when its vice-president and an executor of the estate, Ralph E. Conrad, filed for \$13,650 due as back salary.<sup>15</sup> Erskine's plan to have all these debts settled from insurance proceeds failed. The family's wealth was gone.

In addition to the hotel venture, Erskine had other interests in Huntsville. In 1916 a main street was built from west to east in Maple Hill Cemetery. To honor his beloved mother who died in 1915, Erskine had constructed beautiful carved limestone and steel gates for the main entrance in 1919.<sup>16</sup> Then in September 1922 he purchased and gave several small parcels of land to the cemetery, to be called the Erskine addition at the east end of this main street. Many of old Huntsville's leading citizens are buried within the three circles in this property. There he constructed a mausoleum using a beaux-arts, neo-classical design.<sup>17</sup>



The Erskine Mausoleum in Maple Hill Cemetery

This imposing structure holds the body of Albert Russel Erskine. Others interred in the handsome stone enclosure are his parents, William Michael and Ursula (Sue) Ragland Erskine, his wife, Annie Garland Lyell Erskine, and his younger brother, Orville Mercer Erskine. Three empty vaults await more of the family.

His was a life well-lived, filled with good deeds. Few others from this city have successes to match. Both Huntsville and South Bend were beneficiaries from the energy and ideas of this "Captain of Industry." The tragic end should take nothing from his accomplishments. This was a good man.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cannon, William A., and Fred K. Fox. *Studebaker, the Complete Story*. Tab Books, Inc. Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania. Chapter 14.



<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*South Bend News Times*, May 24, 1931.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*South Bend Tribune*, February 14, 1926, and *South Bend News Times*, February 20, 1933.

<sup>6</sup>*South Bend Tribune*, October 1, 1938.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, April 13, 1975, June 22, 1983.

<sup>8</sup>Mastin, Mary Irby. *Hooe-Russel Genealogy*. Heritage Room, Huntsville, Alabama, Public Library. 1956.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Jones, Jon Rison, Jr. Letter to *The Huntsville News*. May 1993.

<sup>12</sup>Articles of Incorporation, Huntsville Hotel Corporation, April 1928. Madison County Probate Records.

<sup>13</sup>*South Bend Tribune* and *South Bend News Times*, July 1, 1933.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*South Bend Tribune*, May 30, 1936.

<sup>16</sup>Brenda Webb, Director, Maple Hill Cemetery, 1997.

<sup>17</sup>Robey, Diane, Dorothy Scott Johnson, John Rison Jones, Jr. and Frances C. Roberts. *Maple Hill Cemetery, Phase One*. The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, Huntsville, Alabama. 1995.

Other individuals consulted in gathering information for this article were: Merritt Wikle, Margaret Goldsmith Hanaw, Harvie Jones, George Mahoney, and Frances Roberts, Huntsville, AL Teri Yoder, St. Joseph County Public Library, South Bend, IN; the staff at the Heritage Room, Huntsville Public Library; and various internet sources for South Bend, Erskines.

by F. Alex Luttrell, III

The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society recently designated several local sites as historically significant and installed new Alabama Historical Association markers at those locations. The local marker committee actively participated in the installation of each of the new markers by working with the sponsoring groups to perform the required research and write the text that was ultimately approved by the Alabama Historical Association. The Howard Weeden Home marker was installed in late 1996, but has not been officially unveiled and dedicated. Dedication ceremonies have been held, however, for the new markers located at New Market Presbyterian Church and Glenwood Cemetery.

On May 19, 1996, at 1:00 p.m., members of the New Market Presbyterian Church and their guests assembled in front of the sanctuary for the purpose of unveiling and dedicating the historical marker which was given in memory of Mr. R. F. Vandiver, Sr. The ceremony commenced with an invocation by Rev. Bradley Hall, minister of the New Market Presbyterian Church. Elder Harold Birchfield then welcomed the crowd and proceeded to introduce the other speakers. Mrs. Virginia Jones entertained the audience with a history of the church. The marker was then unveiled by Mr. Ray Vandiver and presented to the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society by Mr. Birchfield. Dr. John Rison Jones, Jr. accepted the marker on behalf of the local society as well as for the Alabama Historical Association. He spoke briefly on the importance of the historical marker program in Madison County. Rev. Hall closed the ceremony with a benediction. The complete text of the marker is shown below.

**NEW MARKET  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Mary Miller deeded land in 1849 to serve both Methodist and Cumberland Presbyterian congregations. The original building burned and the Methodists in 1882 sold their interest in a second building. This second church destroyed by a tornado in 1884. Present building erected in 1888. In 1906 the Cumberland Presbyterians left to form a new church, and the remaining members affiliated with the First Presbyterian Church, USA; N.J. Powers, Minister.  
National Register of Historic Places, 1988

**ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 1996**

The second marker dedication ceremony took place on Sunday, October 27, 1996, at 2:00 p.m. near the entrance to Glenwood Cemetery. This event was hosted by Mrs. Ollye B. Conley, principal, and the students at the Academy for Science and Foreign Language. The students have been involved for several years in a project to revitalize the cemetery and learn more about those prominent African Americans buried therein. Izeuma Olowolowo, a student at the Academy, welcomed the crowd which included fellow students, parents, faculty, school administrators, and many Huntsville citizens. Dr. William Gladys, pastor of the Saint Bartley Primitive Baptist Church, gave the invocation and Dr. Henry Bradford, pastor of the Church Street Cumberland Presbyterian Church of America spoke. The Saint Bartley Primitive Baptist Church Choir entertained the audience with several musical selections before Mrs. Conley introduced the special guests. Among those in attendance were Dr. Ron Saunders, Superintendent of the Huntsville City Schools, Mrs. Brenda Webb, Director of Huntsville Cemeteries, and Mr. Richard Showers, Huntsville City Councilman. Councilman Showers proceeded to unveil the marker which was paid for by an appropriation from the City of Huntsville. Mrs. Conley presented the marker to Mr. Alex Luttrell, Chairman of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society Market Committee, and Dr. Frances C. Roberts, Past President of the Alabama Historical Association. The program concluded with Ms. Elaine Rice's rendition of "Amazing Grace" and a benediction by Dr. John L. Herndon. The complete text of the two-sided Glenwood Cemetery marker is shown below.

#### GLENWOOD CEMETERY

Glenwood Cemetery replaced the original slave cemetery, known as "Georgia," which had been established in 1818 and located north of the present Huntsville Hospital. Glenwood Cemetery was established in 1870 by the City of Huntsville following the purchase of 10 acres from the Benjamin W. Blake estate, originally a part of the John Brahan Plantation. Additional land was added in 1875 from the W.W Darwin family, resulting in the current configuration. Distinguished African Americans buried here include veterans of America's wars beginning with the Civil War, former slaves, accomplished artisans, professionals in many fields, clergymen, educators, entrepreneurs, politicians, and other leaders.

(Continued on other side)

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 1996

EARLY  
COMMUNITY LEADERS  
BURIED HERE INCLUDE;

Henry C. Binford, Educator  
Daniel S. Brandon, Alderman  
William H. Gaston, Clergyman  
Charles Hendley, Jr., Editor,  
*Huntsville Gazette*  
C.C. Moore, Postman  
Burgess E. Scruggs, Physician

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 1996

In addition to the previously mentioned markers, others are in various stages of the review, approval, and installation process. In early 1997, the market committee identified four additional sites that were deemed worthy of historical markers. These included the LeRoy Pope Mansion, Historic Viduta/Hotel Monte Sano, Temple B'nai Sholom, and the original site of the Lakeside United Methodist Church. The City of Huntsville provided the funds for these markers through an appropriation in their FY97 budget. Marker committee members and other individuals from the sponsoring groups began the task of the required research and writing the text for each of the markers. After many months of review and discussion, the text for each marker was approved by the local committee and the Alabama Historical Association Marker Committee, and the markers were ordered from the manufacturer. A fifth marker, sponsored and paid for by the First Baptist Church, commemorates the original site of the Enon Baptist Church in Meridianville. Official unveiling and dedication ceremonies will be scheduled for each of these markers as soon as they arrive and are erected.

With work on the above markers nearly complete, the marker committee will soon turn its attention toward selecting additional sites to be added to the list of proposed markers. This list is constantly reviewed and each site is prioritized based on national, statewide, and local historical significance; age; location; accessibility to the public; and funding availability. The committee is also working with governmental agencies and local civic organizations to secure funding for the erection of these future markers. The newly erected markers, along with each of the more than 60 existing historical markers throughout Madison County, will be featured in a new publication currently in preparation. 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.



Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Doyle, Councilman Showers



The Glenwood Cemetery Marker

**Annual Report of the Treasurer**  
**HUNTSVILLE-MADISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
 July 1, 1996 - June 30, 1997  
 John M. Shaver, Treasurer

Checking Account Balance, June 30, 1996	\$3,522.30
Savings Account Balance, June 30, 1996	\$1,067.46
Certificates of Deposit, with interest to date	<u>\$5,274.96</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$9,864.72</b>

Receipts:

Dues.....	\$5,634.00
<i>Historical Review Sales</i> .....	79.50
Map Sales.....	274.00
Interest on Savings.....	35.39
Interest on CDs.....	<u>290.29</u>
Total Receipts	\$6,313.18
Funds Available	16,177.90

Disbursements:

<i>Historical Review Printing</i> .....	\$2,117.55
Program Expense.....	175.00
Postage.....	282.65
Meeting notices.....	668.26
Marker Committee.....	105.07
Post Office Box Rent.....	40.00
Arts Council.....	50.00
Newsletter.....	176.63
Recording Secretary.....	36.78
Social.....	103.82
Administrative.....	17.78
Trade Day.....	<u>35.64</u>
Total Disbursements	\$3,809.18

Checking Account Balance, June 30, 1997	\$5,700.62
Savings Account Balance, June 30, 1997	\$1,102.85
Certificates of Deposit, with interest to date (Mature 1/12/98)	<u>\$5,565.25</u>
<b>TOTAL BALANCE</b>	<b>12,368.72</b>

<b>MAPLE HILL BOOK PROJECT</b>	<b>\$7,986.16</b>
Cash.....	\$986.16
CD.....	7000.00
(Matures 2/11/98)	



: The Huntsville Historical Review, Vol 24, No 2, Summer 1997-Fall

If you know someone who may be interested in becoming a member of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, please share this application for membership.

HUNTSVILLE-MADISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
P. O. Box 666  
Huntsville, AL 35804

Membership Application 1997-98

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Telephones: Home \_\_\_\_\_

Work \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Dues:      Individual: \$10.00      Family: \$18.00

My check for \$ \_\_\_\_\_ payable to Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society includes a subscription to *The Huntsville Historical Review* and all the Society's activities.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature









The purpose of this society is to afford an agency for expression among those having a common interest in collecting, preserving and recording the history of Huntsville and Madison County. Communications concerning the organization should be addressed to the President at P. O. Box 666, Huntsville, Alabama 35804.

Manuscripts for possible publication should be directed to the Publications Committee at the same address. Articles should pertain to Huntsville or Madison County. Articles on the history of other sections of the state will be considered when they relate in some way to Madison County. All copy, including footnotes, should be double spaced. The author should submit an original and one copy.

*The Huntsville Historical Review* is sent to all current members of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. Annual membership is \$10.00 for an individual and \$18.00 for a family. Libraries and organizations may receive the *Review* on a subscription basis for \$10.00 per year. Single issues may be obtained for \$5.00 each.

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Huntsville Historical Review, Vol. 24 [2022], No. 2, Art. 1

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