

# Huntsville Historical Review

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Volume 24 | Number 2

Article 4

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7-1-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Byers, David (1997) "Albert Russel Erskine," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 24: No. 2, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol24/iss2/4>

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Byers: Albert Russel Erskine

## 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

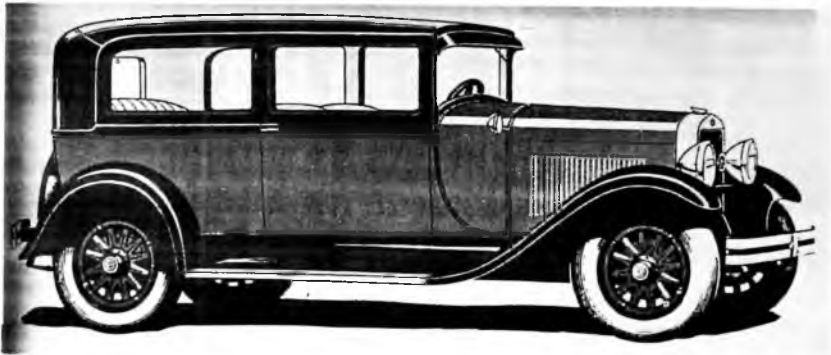


Portrait of Russel Erskine, courtesy of the Huntsville Art Museum

Byers: Albert Russel Erskine

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.

Byers: Albert Russel Erskine

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.