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Harvilee Phillips Harbarger

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Harbarger: The "Big Spring" In Huntsville's History
THE "BIG SPRING" IN HUNTSVILLE'S HISTORY
By
Harvilee Phillips Harbarger

The colorful history of Huntsville is centered around the phenomenal Big Spring from which source, until 1953, has come the total water supply of Huntsville. This city is truly a scenic replica of the genuine old South with all of its life, past and present, having as its nucleus the Big Spring. The spring has been in constant use by the white man since it had its first settler in 1805. At that early date, the basis for Huntsville's water system was realized, with water that was said to be of such quality and goodness, that better drinking water can hardly be found anywhere.

Concerning the early settlement at the Big Spring, as it was called by the Indians, Thomas J. Taylor, a pioneer local historian, has this to say in his history of Madison County: Old man Isaac Criner, who died some four or five years ago at the age of ninety-three or four, says that he and his brother had put up a cabin when John Hunt stayed all night with him on his way to Huntsville Spring, and his brother's wife baked bread for him and David Bean to bring with them—that was the fall of 1804. And that Bean helped Hunt put up a cabin and then Bean came back and settled on Bean's Creek near Salem, Tennessee. Hunt went to east Tennessee and returned with his family in the spring of 1805. If there were any other settlers in the county in the spring of 1805, except those mentioned, Mr. Criner had not heard of them. This is the substance of the statement Mr. Criner made to me, and has often made to others, and as he was a man of remarkable memory and undoubted veracity, I am disposed to give his statement credit. I do not think there is any doubt of John Hunt's being the pioneer in the settlement of Huntsville; yet I think it quite probable that there were several settlers in the county who came here about the same time. The settlements in Tennessee in 1805 had reached down to the Elk River in the neighborhood of Winchester, and several of the pioneers claimed to have come across the line into this county in the year 1805. But taking Mr. Criner and Mr. Hunt as the original pioneers, there was this difference in their careers. Mr. Criner came here before he attained his majority, settled in a remote corner of the county, stayed at home and worked hard, and when he died, left to his children a large body of the land where he settled. John Hunt came here in the full meridian of life with very little of this world's goods, and when the lands at public sale brought prices beyond his reach, the land became the property of richer men. All that he received of the vast domain on which he was the first to settle was a half-acre town lot in the city that bears his name, a name that will be remembered as long as the city of Huntsville marks the place where he built his cabin and commenced to battle with the wilderness.¹

After the Irishman Hunt returned to the Big Spring with his family, he and his sons, William and George, busied themselves with getting settled. Great numbers

¹ Thomas J. Taylor, *History of Madison County*. (Manuscript in possession of Mrs. Douglas Taylor, Huntsville, Alabama)

of rattlesnakes, not Indians, were the main worry of these new settlers. These reptiles were in the rocks and crevices all around the bluff and the general area of the spring. Long hollow canes were filled with gunpowder and shoved back among the crevices of the rocks and a charge ignited. Repetition of this same practice was done for weeks until the snakes retreated into the caves.²

Word traveled to former friends and neighbors of the unusual fertility of the soil, the beauty of the country, and of the wonderful Big Spring. Beginning in 1806, large numbers of homeseekers began to come into the county from middle and east Tennessee and from Georgia. At the time the county was being surveyed, John Hunt served as a guide since he was familiar with the area and to some extent was friendly with the Indians who used the area as a hunting ground.³ It was during this time that Leroy Pope of Petersburg, Georgia, is believed to have made his first journey into the county to examine the lands around the Big Spring.⁴

Within four years after the arrival of the first pioneer, the land which is now Madison County had an almost incredible population of more than 3,000 settlers. By a proclamation of the Honorable Robert Williams, Governor of the Mississippi Territory, Madison County was created and established the 13th day of December, 1808.⁵

John Hunt had anticipated the sale of lands when he first came to the county. Before the government land sales started in 1809, and before the town was laid out, Hunt made application to purchase two hundred acres in the immediate site of Huntsville including the Big Spring, but was unable to perfect his title to this land because he could not raise enough money to complete the purchase. So the quarter section of land, upon which was located the spring, was in turn sold to Leroy Pope for twenty-three dollars an acre, and this was indeed an exorbitant price in 1809. The bidding for this piece of land was sharp because it brought four times as much as any of the adjoining lands. Pope bought this land with a view of locating the county seat upon it.⁶ On December 23, 1809, when the commissioners were given the authority by the Mississippi Territorial Legislature to select a county seat, Pope's site was chosen. Pope requested that the town be named "Twickenham" in honor of the estate of Alexander Pope, the famous English poet, and the name was accepted.⁷

² Pat Jones Scrapbook, Huntsville Public Library.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Frances C. Roberts Interview, February, 1955.

⁵ Edward Betts, *Early History of Huntsville, Alabama, 1804-1870*. (Montgomery, Alabama, 1916), p.11.

⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷ Ibid.

The streets of the town were laid out with reference to the spring bluff. This work was probably done by J. W. Leake, a local surveyor, who according to record, did all such work until 1816, when an Englishman named Hunter Peel came into the area to live.⁸ Twickenham, as the town was first named, was bounded on the north by what is now Holmes Avenue, on the east by Lincoln Street, on the south by Williams Avenue, and on the west by Gallatin Street and Oak Avenue.⁹

The town was in the process of being platted when the commissioners bought thirty acres, the south half of which was purchased from Leroy Pope for twenty-five dollars an acre. The thirty acres obtained by the commissioners was that immediately adjacent to the spring bluff—comprising a portion of the courthouse square. This thirty acres was divided into half-acre lots, which when sold, brought from \$200 to \$500 each.¹⁰ The total revenue derived from the sales was \$10,000, and was used in the construction of public buildings which were begun immediately.¹¹

Just like other towns, Twickenham had local dissension and internal strife, and as might be guessed, the name of the town was one bone of contention. According to Edward Chambers Betts in his *Early History of Huntsville*, legend claims that the settlement was divided into two parts, and there existed two powerful factions. These were the "Royal Party" and the "Castor Oil Party," being so named because of the leadership of each. The former was led by Leroy Pope and contended for the name of Twickenham, while the latter was led by John Hunt who operated a castor oil shop and spoke for the name of Huntsville.¹² This traditional tale may or may not have given the real names of the factions, but historical records do reveal that though the town was legally named Twickenham, the spring, and to some extent, the settlement around it was known as "Hunt's Spring. This fact, taken in connection with the knowledge that there were those who believed respect should be shown to Hunt as a pioneer settler, and an even more potent circumstance that Twickenham was an English name—all added to the angry discussion. The English name, no doubt, made it very unpopular, for at that time relations between Great Britain and the United States were unfriendly and strained to the breaking point by the unfavorable British naval policy toward American commerce on the high seas. This subsequently led to the War of 1812 and perhaps explains the desire for a change in name.¹³

Replying to the demand of the people, the Territorial Legislature, by act of November 25, 1811, changed the name of the town by providing that: 'From and

⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Ibid., p. 25.

¹³ Ibid.

after the passage of this act, the county town of Madison County—now called Twickenham—shall be called and known by the name of Huntsville.” The same legislature passed an act on December 9, incorporating Huntsville and gave it its first municipal charter and government.¹⁴

The significance of the Big Spring as the center of early Huntsville is expressed in a letter written by John W. Walker, later United States Senator, to his friend, W. H. Crawford, then Secretary of the United States Treasury in Washington, DC. In 1815 he wrote: “Huntsville is situated around the finest spring in the world; the spring forms a semicircle one hundred feet wide, and at a trivial expense the stream can be made navigable to the Tennessee River; which is only ten miles distant. The market house is of brick; the jail of wood. In its immediate vicinity are five cotton gins. The average land in the county will produce 1000 pounds of cotton to the acre and 800 bales will be this year’s crop. The land is also admirably adapted to tobacco raising. Besides the gins in Huntsville, there are twenty in the county.”

Also quoting from Ann Royall, woman journalist of 1818: “The land around Huntsville and the whole of Madison County is rich and beautiful as you can image and the appearance of wealth would baffle belief. The citizens are gay, polite, and hospitable and live in great splendor. Nothing else like it in our own country.”¹⁵

Channeling the waters of the Big Spring for town use came in 1823 when the trustees of Huntsville gave Hunter Peel permission by contract to erect a water-works system. The contract held in its content that in one year Peel should put up a hydraulic wheel that would carry the water to a reservoir with a high enough elevation to supply the city sufficiently with water. The reservoir was to have a capacity of 1,000 cubic feet and the pipes were to be buried low enough beneath the surface of the ground to keep them from freezing and also to prevent any obstruction in building and opening the streets. Peel was to have control of the water rates and was to be entitled to proceeds from the water tax.¹⁶ Permission was given him by Leroy Pope to erect a dam across the spring and to build a house at the dam to cover the machinery, not over twenty feet by thirty feet. Peel formed a partnership with James Barclay, a practical machinist, and together they constructed the reservoir and organized the water works.¹⁷

In 1823 the reservoir was a small “goose pin” of a building attached to one end of the courthouse. No doubt this was a small affair as there were frequent complaints about the scarcity of water in it and complaints also that some people who had no hydrants used their neighbors’ and avoided paying water taxes.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ Scrapbook, Huntsville Public Library.

¹⁶ Deed Book, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

¹⁷ Taylor Manuscript.

Cisterns with charcoal purification were used by others as a source of water supply.

The first reservoir was supplied with water by means of a self-propelling turbine wheel at the spring and red cedar water pipes were used to carry water up the hill to the reservoir. However, this first reservoir and system proved unsatisfactory and the city fathers became dissatisfied with Peel's operation. According to the editor of the *Southern Advocate* in its issue of May 18, 1827, the people of Huntsville were dreadfully cheated by the first contract. The price paid for the deal was too high and completion of the contract to supply the town was not accomplished.¹⁸

Consequently, Peel was released by the city as proprietor of the water works and a contract with Thomas A. Ronalds of New York was drawn up in March, 1828. Nine hundred dollars was appropriated by the city for erection of a new reservoir on the public square and for procuring a regular supply of water.¹⁹ The new reservoir was a two-story brick building with the reservoir occupying the first floor and the meeting chamber for the city council filling the second.²⁰

In the new system wooden pipes were made of red cedar logs cut about eight feet long. These pipes, bored through the center, were tapered at one end and hollowed at the other. Joints or connections were held in place by iron bands.²¹ The primitive method used to bore these logs was comprised of a horse attached to a long pole going around in a circle, thus operating the large auger. The logs were held securely in place by the use of clamps. A shop for this purpose was located on Green Street and owned by a Mr. Neely. The cedar pumps being made there were generally in use by people who had wells instead of hydrants.²² Relics of these early cedar water pipes have been unearthed on many occasions, and have been found to be in a good state of repair. There are a few of the early cedar log pipes on display in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

Water from the spring was forced through these pipes by means of a large turbine wheel situated in a frame house which was built directly over the water. The turbine was operated by water power and required very little attention.²³

Ronalds operated the water system from 1828 until 1836 when Thomas and George Fearn gained control of the water works and agreed to construct the new reservoir on Echols Hill, at the junction of the streets, "so as to admit as elevation

¹⁸ *Southern Advocate*, May 18, 1827, Huntsville, Alabama

¹⁹ Minute Book, 1828-1834, City Council Records, Huntsville, Alabama, City Hall, pp. 78-80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹ Betts, *op. Cit.*, p. 74.

²² D. C. Monroe Interview, April, 1949.

²³ William Dickson, "Early History of Huntsville," Scrapbook, p. 15.

of water therein forty feet above the surface of the public square and to be of dimensions not less than sixty feet by sixty feet and ten feet deep.” They also agreed to set up an iron pump at the spring and to begin laying down iron pipes from the spring to the four corners of the public square.²⁴

The town council required that a committee of two, called the water-works committee, be appointed to act as overseer for the city for the contract made with Thomas and George Fearn to supply the city with water. The committee served a term of six months and then another was elected.²⁵

The new reservoir was nine-six feet above the level of the spring, was seventy feet in diameter, ten feet deep, and held 287,523 gallons of water. It was protected by a red cedar picket fence about fifteen feet in height and was located on ground at the junction of Echols and McClung Streets.

The water supply remained under private ownership for eighteen years, and in 1854 the following entry in the town council’s record states: “Resolved that a committee consisting of three members be appointed to examine and inquire into the propriety of purchasing, for the benefit of said corporation, the water-works from Dr. Thomas Fearn, and to ascertain from him the terms upon which said water-works can be purchased.” Dr. Thomas Fearn deeded the water-works to the city in 1858 for the sum of \$10,000 to be paid in ten equal annual installments and the first payment was in the amount of \$300.00.²⁶

Water taxes were established in 1859 on July 1.²⁷ Also on the same day the water works was valued at \$17,020.53.²⁸ And during this year a new house to cover the machinery at the dam was proposed.²⁹ Thus the water-works became municipally owned and in 1887 the town obtained from the state legislature \$15,000 in bonds for water system improvements.³⁰

The excavated and obsolete reservoir was replaced by a standpipe, built between 1887 and 1890. Today in its stead, is a beautiful natural sunken garden. The standpipe is sixty feet high, ten feet in circumference, holds 600,000 gallons of water, and cost \$7,000. This pipe had the advantage of being more sanitary as no foreign matter could be thrown into it, as could the excavated reservoir. Records show that in 1894 the town was served by approximately ten miles of cast-iron water mains. These pipes varied in their diameters; some were two, three, four, six, eight, and twelve inches wide.

²⁴ Deed Book, Madison County Courthouse.

²⁵ Minute Book, Huntsville City Hall.

²⁶ Minute Book City Council Records, Huntsville, AL, p. 260.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Cast Iron Pipe News.*

Harbarger: The "Big Spring" In Huntsville's History

A colonel of the Engineer Corps of the United States Artillery, W. Hiram Chittenden, stationed in Huntsville in 1898 during the Spanish American War became interested in the spring and its source. He knew there was a limestone bluff, a small opening, a natural fountain, and millions of gallons of water. It seemed incredible that this tremendous supply of water just flowed out of a bluff. So he obtained permission from the mayor to explore the mysteries of such a phenomenon. Along with an orderly and using a canoe, they entered the small opening in the bluff. The two men rowed for approximately two and one-half miles, and at that point the stream divided; one half going toward Huntsville and the other toward the southwest. That division may account for the formation of Byrd and Brahan Springs.³¹

Also in 1898 the Village Improvement Society of Huntsville was formed. Among the things proposed by them to beautify the town was a plan that the "Big Spring" lot should be laid off by a landscape gardener and opened as a park. The Village Improvement Society noted that the courthouse fence was used as a hitching post by all of the people of the county. As an unsanitary condition resulted, the Medical Society and thoughtful citizens petitioned the mayor and aldermen for its removal. The petition for removal was blocked by merchants who owned stores on the square, saying trade would be destroyed if the fence were removed.

Colonel Chittenden's investigation proved that hitching horses at the courthouse fence was a menace to the health of all the drinkers of "Big Spring" water. Just under the square he discovered a crevice through which seepage could get into the spring. The Village Improvement Society again urged the removal of the fence and again met with defeat. However, the city fathers were going to have to take some measure, as in October 1898 cases of typhoid fever were reported. Consequently, the square was paved in brick as a precaution.

At this time, in 1898, the city commissioned Colonel Chittenden to beautify the spring. Chittenden realized that accessibility of water from the spring would be aided by the removal of loose debris from the channel opening, construction of an intake basin, installation of pumping equipment, and necessary cleaning of the spring to keep it as free of pollution as possible. The natural dam was blasted, a wider basin made, and the banks of the branch were walled in and curbed with white stone. A small waterfall was left at the entrance to the street, and three stone bridges were built across it. A new pump house was constructed in 1899 at the extreme northwest corner of the park so as not to mar the beauty of the grounds, as the old pump house surely must have done. Mr. Azel A. Love then became the engineer for the city's water system at this new pump house.³²

³¹ Elizabeth H. Chapman, Scrapbook, "Huntsville's Life in the Gay 90's," Huntsville Public Library.

³² Interview Miss Dorothy Love Adair, March, 1955.

The Village Improvement Society then began work on landscaping the park, and picnics were encouraged. Oftentimes visitors of the old Huntsville Hotel (located on the northwest corner of the square) descended the steps between Murray and Smith's Jewelers and the White Building on the west side of the square to rest and enjoy the beauty of the spring. In 1899 the fountain which rose from a rock in the basin froze, and, as the legend goes, the spring was bedecked in all the wonders of winter. The trees were feathery and limestone bluff was a shining mass of ice. Nevertheless, the wonders of King Winter did not wash away the courthouse hitching post fence, and the century ended with the editor of *The Democrat* still writing articles against it.

Beginning the twentieth century, the water-works of Huntsville was an established operation and functioned as such with Mr. Frank Murphy as overseer. On October 1, 1912, Claude D. Phillips became superintendent of the water works and street departments. During his first year of service, from October 1, 1912 to September 29, 1913, total water tax receipts were \$15,992.66. In an interview with him, he stated that in order to beautify the spring park still further, concrete walks were to be laid. In 1912 there was a Hutchens Lumber Company directly across the street from the spring, on the hill, and an auditorium and skating rink adjacent to this. Also situated next to these buildings on the southwest corner of Gallatin and Canal Streets was the small office of the water-works and street department. The vault securing sewer maps and pipeline data were in this brick building. The ice house was across Canal Street from this office.

For generations there had been near epidemics of typhoid fever in Huntsville, and in 1917 while Claude Phillips held office as superintendent, a typhoid epidemic struck Huntsville. Along with Dr. Carl Grote, who came to Huntsville as county health officer in 1917, they explored the possibility that the drinking water coming from the spring was being contaminated in some spot—thus spreading the disease. It was discovered that open toilets, located over rock crevices in back of the old market house, where the Twickenham Hotel later stood, were a direct cause of the epidemic. It was also found that the first chlorine plant installed in 1914 was inadequate.

Mayor Earle Smith authorized Mr. Phillips to blast in the rock and put in an iron sewer. It is interesting to note that though the blasting was done in solid rock, at ten and twelve foot depths, not a window glass was broken around the blast scene. It was at this time that the drip-type chlorine plant was installed at the water works under the supervision of Dr. Grote. In 1917 there were 120 cases of typhoid fever, and the year following the installation of the adequate chlorine plant, there were only four reported cases.³³

Heretofore, the only opening into the spring that has been mentioned is the small aperture in the cliff above the basin. However, there is another opening on Greene

³³ Interview, Dr. Carl Grote, February, 1955.

Street in front of the site of the old Post Office Building which was made in 1917. This opening was made during the time Mr. Phillips was in the water department and was made so that investigators could see what contaminated water at the spring and caused the fever around 1917. Again, during the blasting of this hole, no windows were cracked or shattered around the blast scene. This feat was accomplished by laying a large mat of baling wire, collected from all the livery stables, over the hole containing the dynamite caps, and the mat of wire absorbed the shock of the blast. This opening is covered, but has since been used by state ground water surveyors.³⁴

The spring shared greatly in greatly in Huntsville's history and was indeed a prominent feature. As the Big Spring was a central place in the town, many incidents of local interest occurred there. In 1878 a lynching occurred just across the street from the spring branch. Two men were lynched, one a white man and the other a Negro who was a butcher by trade.³⁵ A few years later in the early 1900s, a carnival came to Huntsville and set up its tents in the vacant lot back of West Clinton School. Sometime during the performance a lion escaped from its cage and according to stores of several older citizens, pandemonium reigned. Carnival spectators were crawling over fences, screaming and running away from the tents. The lion was finally cornered and captured at the Big Spring.³⁶

Negro baptisms in the spring branch were a site to behold. On Sundays when the ceremonies were in progress, the banks of the branch were lined with spectators and the curious. Mrs. Lillian Taylor Wall, aunt of the historian Judge T. J. Taylor, told of a baptizing she saw at the branch just after the Civil War. She said that the pastor put the good sister under the cold, cold waters of the spring, and she rose with a mighty splash and shouted with great exuberance: "Hallelujah—I'm free from sin and slavery, praise the Lord and bless General Grant." These baptizings were a regular event at the spring well into the twentieth century.³⁷

No principal changes were made to the water works as an operation of the municipality except to expand the mileage of water pipe. In 1922 Raymond Jones became superintendent of the water works and in 1923 this function was taken over by Mr. J. D. Wall. With the coming of the arsenal in 1940, the growth of Huntsville became so rapid that during the 40s and especially during the days of World War II Huntsville was considered a boom town. The new industries arriving and the added population proved to be a strain on the grand old spring. During the late fall of 1942, the discharge of the spring dropped below or became approximately equivalent to the amount necessary for municipal consumption. Consequently, city officials requested that the state make an investigation. As a result of this review, restrictions on municipal use of water had to be enforced.

³⁴ Interview Mr. Claude D. Phillips, January, 1955.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview Mr. D.C. Monroe.

³⁷ Interview Mrs. Howard Jones, February, 1955.



Snapshots from a Scrapbook
The Big Spring
(Photos Courtesy of Clyde Martz)

During this period, no water flowed over the lower dam and pumpage was from storage in the upper pool of the spring, plus available discharge from the spring.³⁸

This survey also showed that the ground water of the Huntsville area was only partly developed and that much additional water could be obtained by developing some of the large springs in the area. Big Spring is developed to the maximum extent which is approximately four million gallons a day during periods of normal minimum flow.³⁹

As a precaution against any enemy sabotage during World War II, a high protective fence was erected. This definitely marred the beauty of the park; but when it was removed, the park once again became one of the beauty spots of the town. After World War II, the population of the city somewhat dwindled with the reduction in personnel at the Redstone and Huntsville Arsenals, leaving the water sources sufficient for supply and demand. However, with the merger of the two arsenals for research and development in the field of guided missiles, the population soared once again. With the growing population, the water supply became inadequate and in 1953 a well was tapped at the old Dallas Mill site. In 1954 additional wells were tapped on the property occupied by the Huntsville Manufacturing Company, the old Merrimack Mill site. In addition to the 600,000 gallon standpipe on Echols Hill, a new reservoir was erected in 1954 on U.S. Highway 431 with a capacity of one million gallons.⁴⁰ The rapid growth of Huntsville is also shown in the water taxes collected in 1954, the total amount being \$470,961.97.⁴¹

Today, the historic Big Spring that has been in constant use since 1805, with the aid of a few supplementary wells, is serving a growing metropolis of approximately 58,000, blending with the historic past and the ever-progressive present.

(Editor's note: this paper was written in 1955, and as residents of Huntsville will recognize, in the nearly half century since, the Big Spring and its environs have undergone a number of improvements and changes, and is today the central feature of a beautiful municipal park in downtown Huntsville.)

³⁸ "Ground Water Resources of the Huntsville Area," *Alabama Bulletin*, No. 62 (Montgomery), p. 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Interview Mr. Martin Phillips, March, 1955.

⁴¹ Interview Mr. Norris Payne, March, 1955.