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Jones: The Huntsville - Madison County Historical Society: The First 50  
**The Huntsville - Madison County Historical Society:  
The First 50 Years**

**John Rison Jones, Jr.<sup>1</sup>**

On November 18, 1951, a meeting was held at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Henry B. Chase to discuss the feasibility of organizing a historical society in Huntsville. Forty-three interested citizens were in attendance, including three members of the Alabama Historical Association - Rucker Agee, the association's president, as well as Hugh W. Carson and Allen Rushton, both members of the Executive Committee. Also present was Frank Chenault, representing the North Alabama Historical Association. The November meeting at the Chase home was the outgrowth of several earlier efforts. While an earlier Tennessee Valley Historical Society had been active in North Alabama some fifty years before, that organization's activities ceased during the First World War. The groundwork for a local historical group had been established years earlier when Mrs. Mattie Patton Darwin, one of Huntsville's earliest librarians, started a historical collection at the Carnegie Library. This effort was expanded during the tenure of Mrs. Elizabeth Beamguard as the library's director, who relied on the considerable talents of Mrs. Bessie Russell to expand the historical collection that we know today as the Huntsville-Madison County Library Heritage Room. Today, the Heritage Room serves an estimated 100,000 historical and genealogical researchers each year.

The greatest impetus for the formation of a new historical society in Huntsville came when Frances Roberts arrived in Huntsville from Gainesville, Alabama. A descendent of Septimus Cabaniss, one of the leading pre-Civil War lawyers in Huntsville, Frances was vitally interested in the formative period of the county prior to statehood. She had enrolled in a graduate program in history at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, a daring move in itself at a time when men dominated college history departments.

The first regular meeting of the newly organized Huntsville Historical Society was held on December 9, 1951, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. James F. Watts, with 64 individuals present. Henry Chase was elected President for a two year term, with Judge Thomas W. Jones as Vice President and Felix Newman as Secretary / Treasurer. Six members were elected to serve as a Board of Governors, and it was resolved that each retiring president would become a member of the board. Five committees - Historical Data, Programs, Historical Markers, Membership, and Constitution / By-Laws - were established to carry out the work of the Society. A quarterly schedule

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of meetings was established, along with an invitational membership requirement, which required a vote of the society. (One may assume that the latter was a vestige of segregation.) Annual dues were assessed at one dollar.

The purpose of the Society was set forth in Article II of its by-laws, which were developed during 1952:

The purpose of this Society is (1) to afford an agency for the expression around those having common interests in the collecting and preserving information about any particular phase of community life in Huntsville, Alabama; and (2) in recording the history of the section of which Madison County is a part.

By 1953 the Society had grown to 78 members when Elizabeth Chapman was invited to speak on her 1930s Master of Arts thesis from Columbia University entitled “Changing Huntsville,” which was later published by her family for limited distribution. Miss Chapman was a granddaughter of Governor Reuben Chapman of Huntsville.

Also in 1953, two historical markers were erected as part of a new state program. One, “Huntsville Firsts,” was unveiled at the Public Library site on Madison Street, and has lately been reinstalled at the Big Spring. The second commemorated the formation of Madison County in 1809. Originally placed on the west side of the Court House, this marker was subsequently moved to the north side of the building.

On April 23-24, 1955, the Alabama Historical Association held its first annual meeting in Huntsville, with the Society and the American Association of University Women as co-hosts. The meeting was part of Huntsville’s celebration of its sesquicentennial; over 315 people registered for this event, which was considered a great success. For the occasion, three new historical markers were erected: The First National Bank, the Masonic Temple, and the birthplace of John Hunt Morgan on Franklin Street.

In 1956, during the Presidency of Alice Thomas, the Society participated in a city project to rename Huntsville’s streets. In addition to the retention of most names, the Society also prepared a list of 100 new names closely associated with the city’s history for future use.

During 1957, the Society was unsuccessful in its efforts to have the remains of General Gabriel Moore, a former Governor of Alabama and long-time resident of Huntsville, removed from Texas to Maple Hill Cemetery. Born in 1785 in Stokes County, North Carolina, Moore graduated from the University at Chapel Hill in 1810. He began his law practice in Huntsville that same year, after having been admitted to the Alabama Bar. Moore served as Speaker of the Territorial House of Representatives; was a delegate to the state constitutional convention; served as Governor of

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Alabama from 1829-1831; and served as a U.S. Senator from 1831-1837. After being defeated for re-election to a second term in the Senate, Moore moved to Caddo, Texas, where he died in 1845. His family would not approve the removal of his remains to Huntsville.

In June 1980, Dr. A. B. Moore, Director of the Alabama Civil War Centennial Commission, urged the formation of a Madison County Committee in which the Society agreed to participate. At the same time, the rapid expansion of the city caused the Society to become increasingly concerned about the preservation of historic buildings still standing in the "Heart of Huntsville" area. The decision to build a new county court house to replace the original 1912 building was a particular cause for concern. Debate over construction of the new courthouse, coupled with a growing concern for preservation, led to the founding of the Historic Huntsville Foundation (a group often confused with the Historical Society) in 1962. Also in 1962, Madison County Commissioner James Record secured funds for eight new historical markers. As the Society planned its tenth anniversary tea at the home of Dr. and Mrs. E.V. Caldwell, it could take satisfaction in both its own growth and accomplishments, as well as the awareness fostered in the community concerning the importance of history in the daily lives of its citizens during a period of rapid growth. While the creation of the Twickenham Historic District had been a major victory for preservation, other areas of the city remained at great risk.

In 1965 the Society sent a proposed list of county historical markers to Mr. James Record. This list included:

- The gravesite of Brigadier General Robert L. McCook at Plevna.
- A marker to honor Joseph and Isaac Criner and Stephen McBroom at the intersection of Mountainfork and Winchester Roads.
- A marker to honor Isaac Wilborn, buried in a private cemetery near Hazel Green.
- A marker to honor the early settlers of Maysville and the McCartney family.
- A marker at Triana to honor early settlers and relatives of Grantland Rice, a noted sportsman and writer of his day.

Most of these markers were never erected, possibly because of the perceived "political" nature of their subject matter. Since that time, the Society's Marker Committee has continually wrestled with the issue of county historical markers. The present Marker Committee has taken a different, far less "political" approach to the matter. In 1989, for example, it erected two markers in New Market, one in honor of all settlers in the area, and the second to commemorate Mount Paran Campground and Cemetery where members of the Davis, Poor, Criner, and Miller families are buried. Nearby is a more recent marker erected to commemorate the site of the  
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County Poorhouse farm and cemetery. I cite these markers as a lesson in both the changing historical perspectives and the need to use limited funds for the commemoration of more important categories of historical sites than those linked to personal family recognition.

In 1964, in preparation for the sesquicentennial celebration of Alabama statehood in 1969, a Research Committee consisting of Mrs. Sarah Huff Fisk, Mrs. W. F. Sparkman, Mrs. Joyce Markwardt Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Shenk, and Mrs. Marjorie Deaton began work on an important project to document the known buildings of 1819 Huntsville. This project culminated in the publication of "A New Map of Huntsville, 1819," which prepared the way for the development of both the Alabama Constitution Village and, later, Mrs. Fisk's remarkable volume, *Civilization Comes to the Big Spring: Huntsville, Alabama 1822*, which she published in 1997. This book details the development of the town square in an Alabama frontier town that would host a state constitutional convention only seven years after its incorporation in 1812. And, as might be expected, as part of the celebration activities the Society raised its annual membership dues to two dollars in 1966!

In 1967 the Society assumed responsibility for selecting items to be placed in the cornerstone of the new courthouse. From the perspective of 34 years later, how I wish we could have included Sarah Fisk's book, as well as Alex Luttrell's volume on historical markers and the Maple Hill cemetery book among those items. Then as now, there are few worthy volumes on early Huntsville history.

Because of the interest generated by plans for the sesquicentennial celebration of Alabama's statehood, one half of the block on the south side of the courthouse square was designated to become a parking garage. Through the energetic efforts of Sarah Fisk, as President of the Society, along with Dr. Frances Roberts, Dr. William McKissack, and Mrs. Anna Rosborough, a coalition was formed with the Huntsville Housing Authority, the City Council, the Madison County Commission, the Alabama Sesquicentennial Committee, and a host of other organizations to use the site to develop Alabama Constitution Village, a reconstruction of the earliest buildings associated with the state constitution convention. This work came to fruition when the Village was created in 1977.

In early 1969 the Sesquicentennial Committee asked the Society to manage the sale of souvenirs during the celebration. On May 2-3 the Society entertained delegates of the Alabama Historical Association with an elaborate series of activities, including a bus tour of 18 historic homes. On May 3 the original Alabama Constitution returned to Huntsville for a year-long display. Later, in August, 224 descendants of the original 44 delegates to the convention were honored in a moving ceremony in the new

Jones: The Huntsville - Madison County Historical Society: The First 50 courthouse during which U.S. Senator John J. Sparkman and Congressman Richard Walker Bolling, the great-great grandson of John Williams Walker, were the main speakers. Senator Sparkman introduced the name of each of the delegates to the convention and his descendants were publicly recognized.

The final event, held on December 14, was particularly memorable. Joyce Smith, costumed as Betsy Ross, presented the city with a 21-star United States flag she had handmade.

For its work in preparing for the sesquicentennial celebration, the Society received a Certificate of Commendation for the American Association for State and Local History for the new map of 1819 Huntsville, and the Alabama Sesquicentennial Award. The Society also benefited greatly from the sale of souvenirs - so much so that it had \$4,575 in its treasury. Naturally enough, annual dues were raised to three dollars in 1970.

Nineteen seventy-one started off with a bang when an unknown young lady appeared at an early meeting that year (they had been increased from four to six meetings per year), and railed against the Society's neglect of Maple Hill Cemetery, in her view Huntsville's most important historical asset. Although 25 years were to pass before Diane Robey's outburst would lead to concrete results, Frances Roberts took positive steps to channel her energy by providing pen and paper for the young woman who would spend the next quarter century in the cemetery recording graves and monuments. Her work would eventually result in the Society's first major publication.

At the meeting on April 29, 1971, Elbert L. Watson of the Huntsville Public Library discussed the feasibility of a scholarly publication by the Society. This was approved at the meeting of May 16; 350 copies of a quarterly journal consisting of 36 pages were to be printed at a cost of \$184 per issue. To ensure that sufficient funds were on hand to cover printing expenses, annual dues were raised to five dollars in 1972. At that time, the Society had approximately 225 members.

In 1973 the Society assisted in the creation of the "Old Historical Town District." At the same time, meetings were reduced from six to four per year, apparently a reflection of dwindling speakers, programs, and attendees. Two years later, in 1975, the Alabama Historical Association again met in Huntsville. At the meeting of April 9 of that year, the Society formally changed its name to the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society. Later that same year, the 1871 "Bird's Eye-View Map of Huntsville" was rediscovered and the Society was able to copyright its reproduction. The map has since become an annual bestseller for the Society.

In 1977 Mr. Watson resigned as Editor of *The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Review*, and was replaced by Dr. Henry Marks. This appointment apparently did not meet with universal approval, and at least one member of the Editorial Board resigned. That same year, the Society

established a high school essay contest with a \$25 prize. Over the next year, two of these essays were published in the *Review*. There are, unfortunately, no further records of the contest.

In fact, official Society records themselves are virtually nonexistent for the next ten years. This is a somewhat surprising development for a group dedicated to preserving the past! While some records of Society activities do exist, those holding them regard them as personal property rather than that of the Society, a regrettable stance on their part. We do know that a crisis of some sort developed over the *Review*, to the extent that the Editor was asked to resign in 1981. That same year, the Society contributed \$3,000 for furnishings in Constitution Village, a sum that had been set aside some years earlier.

Although the *Review* was published during the years 1981-1987, there was a noticeable decline in the quality of articles, and issues from that period are largely padded with book reviews and Society membership lists. At the Society meeting of March 31, 1985, during the presidency of Dorothy Luke, it was discovered that the *Review* had not, in fact, been published regularly since 1983.

In late 1986 or early 1987, Dr. Frances Roberts became President of the Society and also assumed the editorship of the *Review*. Dr. Roberts undertook a complete reorganization of the Society; she persuaded Dr. Thomas Wren, newly appointed Professor of History at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, to assume the presidency and Dr. John Rison Jones, Jr., who had recently returned to Huntsville, to serve as Vice-President for Programs. Although Dr. Wren left UAH within the year, the Society prospered under new leadership, and by 1995 had achieved an all-time high of 472 members.

It was during this period that the Board decided to place copies of the *Review* in all middle and high school libraries. Dr. Roberts and Dr. Jones also collaborated on the development of a brochure for the Huntsville Pilgrimage Association's walking tours in Maple Hill Cemetery as a contribution from the Society. In 1990 dues were raised to their current level of \$10 for individuals and \$18 for families, in order to cover rising printing costs.

The Society's meeting of August 11, 1991 was indicative of the new quality of programs. During that meeting Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger, Colonel Lee James, Dr. Dave Harris, Mr. Bill Stubno, and Dr. William Lucas discussed the work of the Von Braun team during its early years in Huntsville.

In 1993 the Society participated for the first time in Trade Day on the Square, sponsored by the Historical Huntsville Foundation and Harrison Brothers Hardware. That decision proved to be a profitable one, generating nearly \$500 in sales. Much of our success was due to Jim Lee's leadership and industry. He procured a copy of the 1861 "plat map" of Huntsville

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Jones: The Huntsville - Madison County Historical Society: The First 50 and, later, the 1875 county map. These, along with the "Bird's Eye-View Map," have been consistent sources of revenue for the Society. This event also revealed a pressing need for an index to back issues of the *Review*. (Before we congratulate ourselves too much, we should also keep in mind that one year we barely made the cost of participation - \$25 - when we cleared five dollars!)

At the June 19, 1994 meeting of the Society's Board, President Lee proposed that the annual membership-meeting lecture be designated "The Francis Cabaniss Roberts Lecture." This proposal was unanimously approved by the Board as a fitting tribute to the "Founding Mother" of the Society. Although Frances' physical health deteriorated over the next several years, her spirit was always alive and well. Her death in 2000 deprived our Society of a splendid example of professionalism. Joyce Smith, Sarah Huff Fisk, Nancy Rohr, Lois Robertson, and Jeanne Henry have carried on her legacy. Thanks to their efforts, the Society remains in good hands.

Perhaps Frances' most important legacy was the transformation of the *Review* from an amateur publication into one of true historical scholarship. She felt, as do many of us, that the history of this county and its people is worth recording, but under rigorous professional standards. If Frances doubted your research, you were in a pile of trouble! I remember one occasion when I found the deed bearing the name of the LeRoy Pope plantation. She was not at all sure that the legal typed copy was correct, and together we went to the courthouse to check the original. Though that sort of treatment did not often sit well with the individual whose work was under review, it does demonstrate her unique faith in original documentation.

Two important events occurred for the Society in 1995. First, Alex Luttrell assumed leadership of the Marker Committee and, second, the first volume on the monuments and inscriptions in Maple Hill Cemetery's oldest sections was published.

In 1996, the Marker Committee was expanded to include representation from Huntsville's African-American community. In 2001, with the generous assistance of the Doris Burwell Foundation that underwrote the publication costs, the committee published an up-to-date volume on Madison County historical markers as part of the Society's 50th Anniversary activities. Seventy-nine markers are recorded in this volume, with the complete text of each and an on-site photograph. It should be noted that four markers have been destroyed or stolen, and that five markers now commemorate important sites related to the African-American presence in Huntsville and Madison County.

Perhaps it was an act of conscience, or a private tribute to Diane Robey, that led Frances Roberts to ask Dr. Jones and Dorothy Scott Johnson to assist in publishing her materials. Dr. Roberts made a personal donation of



\$5,000 to the Society to publish an additional 1,000 copies of this important volume. This was, perhaps, an unwise publishing decision since only about 1,000 copies have been sold to date. Nevertheless, the volume has been well received and it is a fitting tribute to both Ms. Robey's and Dr. Roberts' concerns that we preserve our history and share it with others.

An important development in tracing the history of Maple Hill Cemetery was the discovery for our generation that Huntsville's slave cemetery, purchased for the city in 1818 and called Georgia, now lies under the parking garage of the Huntsville Hospital. A new marker will shortly appear there. Added to this was the discovery of the original name of the LeRoy Pope plantation, Poplar Grove. The city was delighted to have a record of land ownership for which no records existed outside of the basic deeds.

With the election of George Mahoney as President in 1999, plans were begun to celebrate the Society's first 50 years. In 2001 the Alabama Historical Association again met in Huntsville. Our own Joyce Smith, who had served as President of the Association during 1999-2000, developed the plans for the meeting. On October 6, the Society celebrated History Day at Big Spring Park by dedicating our 80th marker on the spot made famous by John Hunt's cabin. Although the weather was uncooperative, we all owe George, David Byers, and their committee chairpersons a great debt for their enthusiasm and perseverance, although I gather that a second performance such as this must wait until 2051. As a final tribute, the long-needed index of the Review was compiled and mailed it to our membership.

So, what have we learned in 50 years as a Society? Here I must perhaps speak more for myself than for the Society as a whole.

First, successful meetings and sustained membership interest require dynamic programs. The Vice-President for Programs is a key appointment within the Society. We are grateful to Raneé Pruitt for her recent service in this capacity.

Second, as a Society we simply must be more productive in terms of historical scholarship. Without the scholarly work of people such as Nancy Rohr, Bill Stubno, Norman Shapiro, and Brian Hogan, we would have nothing substantial to publish. Because the *Review* currently has no backlog of materials awaiting publication, our new Editor, Mr. Ed Cochran, needs your help.

At the same time, we must ensure that the *Review* and our other publications maintain high standards for historical accuracy and scholarship. We must not become complacent to the subtle threats posed to history as a discipline, and not allow ourselves to slip into sensationalism simply to attract an audience.

I have suggested, and if you hear a rumble it will come from Maple Hill Cemetery and Dr. Roberts' grave, that historians must cease to look

Jones: The Huntsville - Madison County Historical Society: The First 50 down on genealogists. This group has lot to offer for publication, the very human side of everyday life in Huntsville and Madison County. There is a wealth of family history available for publication and we should take advantage of it to make the Review the real journal of historical record for this area.

Finally, we must reach out to a broader segment of the community, particularly to the young. Who will take our place when we are gone? We must see to it that the young people of our community develop an interest in our history and an appreciation for it as a vibrant force in the community.

The first 50 years of our Society have been exciting and, I believe, productive. The next 50 years will require a sustained effort on the part of the membership to ensure that the Society continues to make a meaningful contribution both to scholarship and to the people of Huntsville and Madison County.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge my debt to Mrs. Bessie Russell for her excellent article on the first 20 years of the Society's history that appeared in *The Huntsville Historical Review*, Vol.1, No. 4 (October 1971).