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The Hundleys of Alabama

Jacquelyn Procter Gray

Oscar Hundley—outspoken, and unafraid of controversy—probably didn't lose any sleep worrying about what other people thought of him. After marrying his second wife, he converted to Catholicism. He later made a controversial decision that ended his impressive political career.



Oscar Hundley

Oscar lived his life very publicly; his friends adored him and his enemies hated him. But no one could ever accuse him of being a bore.

Oscar's grandparents came to Alabama from Virginia. One source reports that Dr. John Henderson Hundley purchased 160 acres in Madison County in 1815 (Coward 152). Another says the Hundleys arrived in 1818 (Owen 869). Yet a third claims they came to Limestone County around 1834 (Edwards and Axford 196).

Dr. Hundley and his wife Melinda Robinson Hundley

built a 12-room, plantation-style home near Mooresville, in which to raise their family. Now owned by Bubba Richardson, a prominent Mooresville resident, the property is situated on the south side of I-565, near the Greenbrier exit.

While most descendants refer to the site as Hundley Hall, others know it as Hundley Hill. Perhaps the disagreement stems from where their recollections linger—the old home place itself or the grounds, which include the nearby family cemetery. Buttercups emerge here and there amid the bricks and rubble of the home's foundation. Among the graveyard's toppled and decaying headstones, a glorious ground-cover of periwinkle still blooms each spring. Both sites retain a quiet beauty.

The sweeping view from the vantage point of the old homeplace probably hasn't changed significantly in the years since the Hundleys celebrated their lives and mourned their tragedies in this pastoral setting—though now it is mostly enjoyed by the cows that graze the land, oblivious to the echoes of the past.

Accounts of the family's years on Hundley Hill at times seem written in tears. John and Melinda's oldest son, Oscar—for whom his nephew, the subject of this story, would later be named—died of unspecified causes in 1852. At the age of 25, he became the first Hundley to be buried in the cemetery near the big house.

The Hundleys did enjoy prosperity during their early years on Hundley Hill, but the start of the Civil War brought it to a crashing halt. Three sons—William, Daniel, and Orville—went to Mooresville to enlist.

While chasing Yankees along the Tennessee River at the height of the war, Major William Hundley was knocked from his horse by a low-hanging branch. Suffering from a skull fracture, William was taken to Hundley Hill to spend his final hours in the comfort of his family. But rather than succumbing, he recovered sufficiently to travel to Atlanta to resume fighting.

On March 31, 1864, a Confederate soldier entered William's tent to call him to breakfast—and found Hundley dead, the victim of a blood clot in his brain. The major had one boot on, and had been in the midst of pulling on the other. He was 29.

William's brother Daniel detailed the event and his extreme sorrow in his diary. William Hundley was posthumously promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and taken home to be buried at Hundley Hill.

Col. Daniel Hundley was captured in Georgia and sent to Johnson's Island near Sandusky, Ohio. During his journey to the Union prison, Daniel implored his captors to treat him with respect, announcing to them, "I trust I am among gentlemen" (R.L.Hundley).

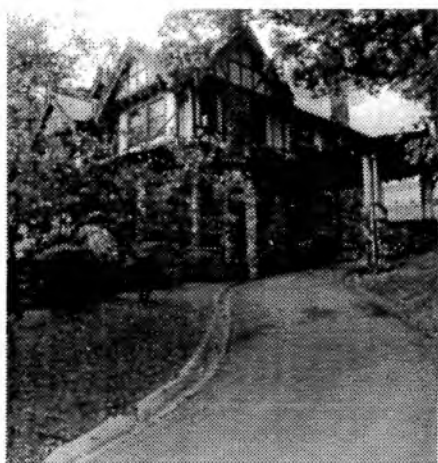
In his diary, published after the war as *Prison Echoes of the Great Rebellion*, he described the horrible conditions of the prison, the suffering of starving prisoners, and his own dramatic escape from Johnson's Island and subsequent recapture.

Daniel was surprised one day to see his brother—probably Orville, but the diary doesn't identify him by name—arrive in the camp ("The Mooresville Militia" 32; Owen 870). Daniel's brother told him about a Yankee raid on their parents' home near Mooresville, and the Union soldiers' threat to shoot their father. Their mother, Melinda, stood in front of her husband and told the soldiers, "Then kill me too. For the ball that kills my husband must first pass through my body." Though the home was ransacked, the lives of their parents were spared (Col. Hundley; Edwards and Axford 197). The surviving brothers came back from the war to find much of the family's wealth depleted.

Judge Richard Hundley, retired presiding circuit judge of Morgan County and a direct descendant of Col. William Hundley, recounts several interesting family anecdotes from this period. Following the war, Daniel bought a new carriage and horses—apparently in the belief that his status still called for some luxury and semblance of class distinction, despite the family's misfortune. Orville was the only Hundley to come out of the war with some fortune intact; in a local who's who publication, he submitted his occupation as "Capitalist."

Despite the efforts of John's sons to rebuild their fortune, the Hundleys either sold or lost Hundley Hill during the post-war Reconstruction Period. Some of the family graves were moved to Maple Hill Cemetery in Huntsville. Others remained where they were, under the protection of the old cedars that surround the site to this day.

The second Oscar Hundley—the subject of this *Quarterly*—was born in Limestone County in 1854, most likely at Hundley Hill. He was named for his father Orville's late brother, who had died just two years earlier.



Oscar Hundley Home, Birmingham — 2811 Niazuma Avenue was also once home of the Vice-president of the now defunct Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railway Co. Courtesy Birmingham Public Library, Catalog Collection 39.18.

As the country mended its wounds, Oscar went “up north” to attend college, but returned to the South fairly quickly, according to a family story, because “the Yankee climate didn’t suit him” (Owen 869). He was educated at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire; Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio; and Vanderbilt University in Nashville before returning to Alabama in 1878 to practice law (Owen 869).

While serving as city attorney from 1882 to 1884, Hundley wrote the Code of Ordinances of the City of Huntsville. In addition to serving 11 years in the state legislature, Hundley was the division counsel for the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway for nearly 20 years. He was defeated in his bid for the Eighth Alabama District’s Congressional seat by Gen. Joseph Wheeler (Owen 870).

After the death of Oscar’s first wife, Annie, in 1893, he married Bossie O’Brien, a Catholic girl significantly younger than himself in 1897 (Owen 870). Not long after that, Oscar converted to Catholicism, despite being descended from generations of devout Disciples of Christ.

It wasn’t Oscar’s opinionated personality or religious conversion, however, that caused his first cousin, William Hundley, to insist that Oscar’s name never again be spoken in his household. In 1896, Oscar did something so scandalous that it cost him a Federal district judgeship for North Alabama and ultimately ruined his political career.

Democrat Oscar Hundley had become a Republican.

In her book *Changing Huntsville 1890-1899*, Elizabeth Humes Chapman described Oscar’s party switch and the subsequent public reaction: “To be born a Democrat and become a Republican was treachery. It was almost as disgraceful as being divorced in the nineties” (38).

The reaction of Charles Lane, editor of *The Evening Tribune* and *Weekly Tribune*, is particularly noteworthy. Chapman wrote: “After Mr. Hundley’s change of parties he was awarded a foreign appointment.” In an editorial commentary, Lane added, “[...] the foreigner it is the better we’ll like it” (39).

After the Senate twice refused to confirm Hundley's nomination, he resigned as district judge in 1909. He sold his Huntsville home the same year, and moved to Birmingham to practice law.

Instead of living a life of shameful exile, however, Oscar became a scion of Birmingham society, taking up residence with his wife in a spacious Niazuma Avenue mansion and earning quite the reputation—as a dancer (R..L. Hundley).

Oscar Hundley died in 1921. He was 67. Though his actions were considered scandalous at the time, they would hardly make the news in today's papers. Oscar truly was a man ahead of his time.

*Jacque Gray is a descendant of William Hundley, who died during the Civil War. She has won several writing awards and currently writes for **Old Morgan County, the Cumberland Presbyterian VISION, and other publications. Gray also has been a contributing writer to various books.***

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