

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 27
Number 3 *Upon This Rock: A Foundation in
Stone Construction*

Article 4

9-22-2001

The A.A. Baker Marble Yard

Jacquelyn Procter Gray

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gray, Jacquelyn Procter (2001) "The A.A. Baker Marble Yard," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 27:
No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol27/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

The A. A. Baker Marble Yard

Jacquelyn Procter Gray

Albert A. Baker was working on the Tennessee State Capitol building in Nashville when he heard reports of possibilities in a north Alabama town. After a visit in 1851, he decided to stay. After setting up shop in Huntsville, Baker and his partner had enough business to earn themselves a comfortable living. For over half a century, the business known as A. A.

Baker Marble Yard produced exquisite monuments, as well as contributions to the thriving town of Huntsville.

Although larger examples of Baker's craftsmanship have been lost to fire, vandals, and "progress," some of the Baker monuments still exist in area cemeteries.

One example of the A. A. Baker Marble Yard's work is found in the Jones-Donnell family cemetery in a cotton field in Greenbrier, AL. The stone was erected for five-year-old Bouldin Collier Jones, who died in January 1855. The child



Headstone of Bouldin Collier—Signed by the A.A. Baker marble yard, this example of carved white limestone illustrates the ability of the material to withstand weathering and pollution.

was the son of John Haywood Jones and his wife Sallie of Athens. The memorial consists of a reclining child on a carved cloth-draped pillow atop a platform raised above the stone's molding capital. The concave and convex series of cove molding designs show the delicate and geometric carving skills of the mason. These elements were designed to allow shadow and light to delineate the strong horizontals in contrast to the vertical stone and the more organic forms of the child. A garland of intricately detailed flowers and leaves crowns the face and sides of the stone. The white limestone has collected permanent shadows of grime and the crisp edges are slightly weathered. The lettering however, is still deeply etched into the surface—even the misspelled “eldist.” The monument bears the signature “A. A. Baker, H. V. Ala.”

One of the more elaborate and beautiful monuments to come out of the Baker Marble Yard celebrates Margaret Moore and her sister Mary Wright. It consists of twin fluted columns topped with urns and is wrapped in a garland of flowers. Legend says that Union soldiers who occupied Huntsville used the two doves atop the urns for target practice.

The success of A. A. Baker Marble yard was short-lived. The masons' lives, along with nearly everyone else's in the country, were upended. The devastation of the Civil War brought fewer orders for luxury items such as monuments and permanent structures. Many Southern cemeteries reflect the peaks and valleys of family fortunes and elaborate monuments gave way to simple markers, if any.

At the conclusion of the War, Albert went back to his home in Owego, NY to open a dry goods store. His nephew, John G. Baker, was also a talented stonemason. He left New York in 1875 and came to Huntsville to revive the family business.

The Bakers cut the limestone that formed the bedrock in the mountains around Huntsville. Monte Sano Mountain yielded gray limestone, while white stone was cut from Russell Hill. The Bakers owned a quarry south of Toll Gate Road, as well as eighty acres about a mile southeast of Round Top Mountain.

One of John Baker's most impressive memorials at Maple Hill Cemetery is the Burritt mausoleum, built after the death of Dr. Amatus

Robbins Burrirt (father of Dr. William Burrirt, whose home is now the Burrirt Museum on Monte Sano Mountain) in August, 1876. The mausoleum showcases both the stone building construction and the carving skills of the Baker Marble Yard employees. The A. A. Baker Marble yard also built the towering monument to Thomas Bibb, Alabama's second governor. Another fine example of John Baker's skills was the marble figure of a peacefully sleeping baby in a protective glass showcase. Sadly, the memorial to Leila and Willie Ward was stolen.

In 1880 Albert Baker came back to Huntsville to stay. Unfortunately, his return was for the occasion of his nineteen-year-old son Alva's burial. Since he was born during his father's management of the Marble Yard, his body was returned to Huntsville. He was the first of the Baker family to be buried in Maple Hill Cemetery.

Albert joined his nephew and took up his chisel and hammer again. The business thrived and they expanded by opening a marble yard on the north side of the square in Athens. Tragedy struck when fire destroyed everything on March 28, 1882. They had intended to insure the business, but never got around to doing so. They lost \$2,500, including all the limestone and sandstone that either melted or exploded in the consuming heat (Fisk).

The Bakers' business wasn't limited to monuments and memorials. Among the many local building projects was the Michael O'Shaughnessy home known as "Kildare." O'Shaughnessy and his brother made their fortune in cottonseed oil, and Michael's home was designed to resemble a castle. The outside of the three-story home was intended to be elaborately carved stone from the A. A. Baker Marble yard. The O'Shaughnessy's finances declined and the top two stories are faced with pebbles. The home still stands on the Huntsville Street named for the estate.

John G. Baker was the grandfather of Huntsville historian and writer Sarah Huff Fisk. According to Mrs. Fisk, as John ventured into many different businesses, his place in the marble yard was taken by his brother Lucius and by James Conway. John, with his partner Henry Helms, developed business rental property on Washington Street. John also built, moved, and repaired houses and invested in farm property

until his death in 1892 (Fisk interview).

The A. A. Baker lot in Maple Hill Cemetery is centered on a monument naming all of the family members buried there. The centerpiece is assumed to have been carved by Albert. The tall pedestal design is covered with a flowing cloth and topped by a book. A row of delicately carved lace is edged with overlapping fringe and tassels at each corner. It is neither the largest nor the most elaborate monument by the A. A. Baker Marble yard, but it is a personal and loving application of a family's skill.

The art of stone carving is more than a well-placed chisel and the tap of a hammer. It requires knowledge of the unique properties of the stone—its density, grain, and color. Sand stone and limestone were plentiful and affordable in the area in the 1800s. Unfortunately, the stone's softness, which made it so easy to carve, also made it vulnerable to the elements. Over time the crisp edges and angles appear to melt like butter. Today granite and marble are preferred for their strength and ability to withstand the ages. The art of carving and stone construction has changed too. Computerized stone cutting begins with



Kildare—The O'Shaughnessy home displays a rusticated foundation and porte cochere piers, dressed ashlar with painted brick quoins, carved stone details around peaks, and a slate roof. The third floor facade is composed of stucco and pebbles. Photo by H. Cross.

someone programming chips to guide lasers and diamond saws across large pieces of stone. The end result is perfect and sterile.

Albert Baker was an artist, as were his partners in the marble yard. We are fortunate that many of his masterpieces still exist and can benefit from constant restoration efforts. And we are fortunate that we can still touch the stone and feel the care with which these craftsmen shaped reminders of the citizens of this community.

Jacque Gray recently received an award in New Mexico where the Proctor family was honored at New Mexico Highlands University Homecoming as the Distinguished Alumni Family of the Year.

Works Cited

Fisk, Sarah Huff. *Built Upon the Fragments*. Huntsville, AL: Pinhook Publishing Co., 2001.

Fisk, Sarah Huff. Personal interviews, September 2001.

Monuments in Maple Hill Cemetery, Huntsville and Jones-Donnell Cemetery, Limestone County, AL.