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**Michael O'Shaughnessy
and
the North Alabama Improvement Company**

Patricia H. Ryan

Huntsville was fortunate indeed to have Michael J. O'Shaughnessy chart her history, both directly and indirectly, for over half a century. Through his connections and influence and that of his brother James, outside capital flowed into the city after Reconstruction to change Huntsville's economic base from a cotton-growing city into an important textile center.¹ By 1904 Huntsville had eleven cotton mills, which, in turn, spawned numerous cottage industries to revitalize the economy until the Redstone and Huntsville Arsenals again changed her future. The group that secured this capital was the North Alabama Improvement Company and later its successor, the Northwestern Land Association.

What attracted Michael O'Shaughnessy to Huntsville is unknown, but in 1881 he founded the Huntsville Cotton Oil Mills, perhaps due to the success of a similar plant he and James had operated in Nashville since the 1860s. Michael must have realized that Huntsville needed to attract capital for industrialization, and in 1886 the O'Shaughnessy brothers joined local citizens to form the North Alabama Improvement Company to promote the area. The incorporation papers stated the general purposes of the company:

The improvement and development of the material resources of North Alabama. The nature of the business it proposes is as follows, namely, to encourage, promote, procure, and secure immigration to North Alabama of the best and most skilled class of persons from all industrial pursuits, to own, buy, sell, lease or hire as the case may be and mortgage all kinds and descriptions of real and personal property, to mine coal, iron and other minerals, to act as commissioner agent in negotiating loans or mortgages as pledges of property on personal security, to own, buy, build, operate, and lease hotels and other improved real estate, to quarry rock, granite, marble and any other material, to sink oil wells, and to construct, buy, own, operate and lease in connection with any of said branches of business one or more railroads, tramways, turnpikes or canals.²



In contrast to the original antebellum four-story Huntsville Hotel, the North Alabama Improvement Company constructed the three-story stone addition pictured above.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

If wealthy capitalists were to visit Huntsville, they would certainly expect the finest accommodations. Therefore, one of the first projects of the North Alabama Improvement Company was the construction of the Monte Sano Hotel and the renovation of the Huntsville Hotel.

Architect John Rea of New York (also spelled Ray and Rae in the local newspapers) drew the plans for the Monte Sano Hotel in the Queen Anne style, often called the *bric-a-brac* style for its exuberance, asymmetry, and eclectic mixture of materials. Queen Anne architecture gained wide exposure in this country at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876; Rae's hotel may have introduced the local citizens to the emerging style.³



The Monte Sano Hotel closed about 1900 and was a private residence until it was demolished in the 1940s.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison Public Library.

The vast three-story structure of frame construction opened in early June of 1887. All 233 rooms featured mountain views and were furnished with the latest conveniences. Guests could amuse themselves with bowling, billiards, croquet or lawn tennis.⁴

In 1886 the North Alabama Improvement Company purchased the Huntsville Hotel with the intent of renovating it. The 1858 structure stood at the northwest corner of Jefferson Street and North Side Square. They refurbished the existing building and built an annex to the north.⁵

Of equal importance, the group realized the need for improved transportation to connect Huntsville with other cities. The company subscribed \$20,000 for a road between Huntsville and Guntersville, \$20,000 for a railroad between Huntsville and Gadsden, and \$25,000 to build a railway up Monte Sano to service the successful hotel.



*Once the Monte Sano Hotel became successful, the railway transported guests between Huntsville and the resort.
Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.*

One of the most far-reaching of the company's successes occurred in 1890 with the securing of the Dallas Mills. The company donated 50 acres for the site and took \$25,000 in stock, with the O'Shaughnessy brothers pledging an additional \$10,000 apiece. The principal product of the new mills was cotton sheeting. The *Huntsville Weekly Mercury* ecstatically predicted the following:

The mill will be the largest and most modern in all of its appointments in the entire South and will make a line of fabrics heretofore not manufactured in the South.... This mill will employ about 2000 hands, and we can readily see if the usual ratio is maintained, will increase the population of Huntsville thirty-five to forty-five hundred people.⁶

Despite early successes, the North Alabama Improvement Company was short-lived. For unknown reasons in 1892, the company essentially dissolved and sold its real estate to the Northwestern Land Association, a group of businessmen from South Dakota, that included the governor of the state, and William S. Wells, Williard I. Wellman, and



Dallas Mill.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

Tracy W. Pratt, with the last three making their home in Huntsville. James O'Shaughnessy was also a charter member. The new group continued to promote Huntsville for many years.

Sadly for preservationists, the tangible successes of the North Alabama Improvement Company no longer remain. The chimney of the Monte Sano Hotel is all that remains of the once elegant structure, demolished for salvage in the 1940s. Fires destroyed the Huntsville Hotel in 1910 and 1911. The long-abandoned Dallas Mills burned in 1991. James O'Shaughnessy's frame Queen Anne-style residence on Monte Sano was destroyed by fire in 1890 and never rebuilt. Michael O'Shaughnessy spearheaded the investment of outside capital to industrialize Huntsville in the late nineteenth-century; it is fitting that his marvelously imposing mansion *Kildare* is his legacy.

Endnotes

1 Unless cited otherwise, the material for this article first appeared in the author's "Northern Dollars for Huntsville Spindles" (Huntsville Planning Department, 1983).

2 Madison County, Ala., Corporation Record 1, p.17.

3 Clem Labine and Carolyn Flaherty, eds., *The Old-House Journal Compendium* (Woodstock, N.Y.:Overlook Press, 1980), p.267. Since *Kildare* and James O'Shaughnessy's house on Monte Sano were both constructed in the Queen Anne style about the same time as the hotel, it is logical to assume they were also designed by architect Rea, although no documentation has been found to support this.

4 James F. Sulzby, Jr., *Historic Alabama Hotels and Resorts* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1960), p.182.

5 Ibid., p.155.

6 *Huntsville Weekly Mercury*, 4 June 1890, p.2.