

Newsletter

July 2015

THIS NEWSLETTER DESCRIBES THE HISTORICAL SETTING in which citizens of Birmingham worked with the local press and elected officials of both the city and the state to raise funds for and dedicate a monument to the soldiers and sailors who fought on the side of the South during the American Civil War.

Birmingham's Confederate Monument

Birmingham's Confederate Monument has stood at the entrance to today's Linn Park since April 26, 1905. On this day, Birmingham Mayor W. Melville Drennen accepted the monument, given by a local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), on behalf of the City. Lieutenant Governor Dr. Russell M. Cunningham accepted it on behalf of the State of Alabama.

Birmingham in 1905

In 1905, Birmingham was a small city consisting of the original 4,000 acres on the north and south sides of the furnaces, foundries, and railroad tracks that formed its spine plus 1,500 acres along Highland Avenue. Its population was less than 50,000. The City of Birmingham owned three small parks, each surrounded by residences. The commercial area extended to Third Avenue North. The county courthouse was on Third, at 21st Street; City Hall was on Fourth at 18th. Businessman Mel Drennen was Mayor and head of the City schools. A Park Board did not exist.

The Confederate government had invested in area mines and furnaces that were destroyed by General James Wilson's Cavalry during the final months of the Civil War in 1865. Six years later, Birmingham was founded in 1871. Persons from all parts of the United States came to the early city to find work in the growing industrial enterprises, most of which were outside of the city limits in 1905.

On the Observance of Confederate Memorial Day

Confederate Memorial Day was first organized in Columbus, Georgia, in 1866. Here as across the South, women had been active during the Civil War helping to care for the wounded, run hospitals, and bury the dead. The Columbus Ladies' Memorial Association resolved to set aside one day annually to pay tribute to fallen Southern soldiers and to decorate their graves with flowers. The women called upon civic organizations across the South to join with them. In Montgomery, a similar group of women had been working



Photograph, 1905. *Birmingham Age-Herald*, April 27, 1905, p. 5.

to protect the remains of 122,000 Alabama soldiers killed during the war, and, as early as November 1865, they had resolved to memorialize these dead with a monument that was erected on the State Capitol grounds in 1898.

The women in Columbus chose April 26 as the date for Memorial Day. For many, this date marked the end of the war. On this day in 1865, General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the Army of Tennessee and all remaining forces in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida—the largest surrender of the war.

In Birmingham, Confederate Memorial Day was first observed as a school holiday on April 26, 1905, the day the Confederate Monument was unveiled. The monument's base had been placed in 1894, the same year in which the

Daughters of the Confederacy was established and Confederate veterans met in Birmingham for their annual reunion. The base was laid following a fundraising campaign led by the *Birmingham News* that raised \$1,020 in four days through public subscription. Architect Charles Wheelock designed the base, and Joseph Meighan of Oak Hill Marble and Stone Works was commissioned to prepare and install it. At the recommendation of Mayor David J. Fox, the City Aldermen approved the project and the proposed location in what was then known as Capitol Park.

The cornerstone was laid in a ceremony held on April 26, 1894. The base stood unadorned for several years until the City mounted an old cannon from the Spanish-American War atop it. Then, in 1900, the ladies of Birmingham's Pelham chapter of the UDC took up the cause of raising \$4,000 and commissioning a funerary-style obelisk. Funds were raised through a week-long bazaar held in City Hall and also through public subscription orchestrated by the *News*. The contract was signed October 19, 1904, with stone contractor L. N. Archer.

On the Observance of Memorial Day in the United States

In March 1868, Mrs. John A. Logan, wife of the commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, toured Richmond and the battlefields of Virginia. She returned to tell her husband of the hundreds of Confederate soldiers' graves she observed decorated with flags, flowers, and wreaths laid "by loving hands" on the South's Memorial Day. Inspired by his wife's report, General Logan declared a day to honor the Union dead from the war, and today's national observance of Memorial Day was established. While this account of the holiday's origin is disputed, the May 30 date and the custom of honoring those who fought for the United States grew from the 1868 observance at the end of the Civil War.

On the Early Work of the UDC

According to Lisa Frank writing in *Women in the American Civil War*, the United Daughters of the Confederacy had five purposes: memorial, historical, benevolent, educational, and social. Chapters across the South were most active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time during which women's clubs were very popular both for continuing education of members and for civic service. The UDC and others provided much-needed assistance to Confederate veterans and their families, there being no federal government pensions or other benefits such as those being provided to Union veterans. The UDC was also active in collecting artifacts, records, and oral histories and in writing memoirs and perpetuating accounts from their perspective on that for which Southern soldiers fought. It was important to the women of the UDC that they and those who served be honored as patriots.

The ladies were also great monument builders. Ninety-three percent of the Confederate monuments raised across the South were built in the years following the formation of the UDC, with 50 percent completed between 1903 and 1912. During this time, placing sculpture in public parks and cemeteries was very popular, and good sculptors and stone workers were available to assist patrons who sought to commission these memorials.

Birmingham's Pelham chapter of the UDC was organized on May 29, 1896, one of seven original chapters in the organization's Alabama Division. Named for Major John Pelham, an artillery commander from Calhoun County, Alabama, the chapter included women who lived in the Five Points area of Birmingham. The early work of the chapter consisted of providing aid to needy Confederate veterans, marking and decorating the graves of deceased veterans, and contributing to memorials and monuments in other states. The group also championed state legislation to establish a pension for Alabama veterans. The chapter's crowning achievement, according to Alabama Division historian Mattie McAdory Huey, was the construction of the stone monument at the entrance to Birmingham's central park.

Charter members of the Pelham chapter were: Mrs. George C. Ball, Mrs. Louis T. Bradfield, Mrs. Wilbur Brown, Mrs. Charles G. Brown, Mrs. L. C. Camp, Mrs. Alfred A. Clisby, Mrs. Evans J. Dunn, Mrs. N. B. Feagin, Mrs. S. Perry Fowlkes, Mrs. Fred Hardy, Mrs. Robert D. Johnston, Mrs. Joseph F. Johnston (first chapter president and wife of Governor and U.S. Senator Johnston), Mrs. Rose Garland Lewis, Mrs. Willis J. Milner, Miss Mary Clare Milner, Mrs. Alexander Montgomery, Mrs. Robert H. Pearson, Mrs. M. A. Randall, Miss Alma Rittenberry, Miss Mary Rittenberry, Miss Lillian Roden, Miss Ola Roden, Miss Kate Rogan, Mrs. David Roberts, Mrs. J. Asa Rountree, Miss Louise Rucker, Mrs. Charles A. Senn, Mrs. Herman Saks, Miss Estelle Slaughter, and Miss Momie Terrell.

On the Dedication of the Birmingham Monument

Festivities organized for the dedication of Birmingham's Confederate Monument included a grand parade, ceremonies at the monument's unveiling with bands and numerous orations, and a procession to Oak Hill Cemetery, where the graves of 45 Confederate dead were "reverently covered with flowers." Businesses closed. The mayor suspended school, and pupils of the Birmingham High School attended en masse. More than 1,000 marched in the parade from the county courthouse to the monument and, after the ceremonies, to the cemetery.

The *Birmingham Age-Herald* of April 27, 1905, provides detailed coverage of the ceremonies, including the speeches. Parade participants included Birmingham police and fire units; City officials; representatives of the Pelham, Birmingham, Ensley, East Lake, and Bessemer UDC chapters;

United Confederate Veterans from Birmingham, East Lake, Bessemer, Pratt City, and Woodlawn; Grand Army of the Republic veterans; Spanish-American War veterans; Howard College cadets; members of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and other organizations; and “distinguished persons in carriages and tally-hos” and “civilians in carriages and afoot.”

The 30-year old Mrs. J. A. Rountree, president of Birmingham’s Pelham chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, presided at the unveiling of the monument. Mrs. Charles C. Brown, chairman of the chapter’s monument committee, presented the monument on behalf of the chapter:

I am directed by Pelham Chapter, United Daughters of the Confederacy, to present to Alabama and the city of Birmingham, this monument to the Confederate soldiers and sailors. When Phaon, the Grecian philosopher, consulted the Oracle he was directed to inquire of the dead and their monuments; so, Pelham chapter would by this plain gray stone shaft direct this and succeeding generations, when seeking examples of heroism, devotion to duty, and patient sacrifice, as inspiration to grander thinking and truer living, to inquire of our dead and our monuments. We would bid you do these things in no spirit of sectional bitterness, no repining, but in loving, loyal devotion to the sublime past and its sad, yet precious memories—feeling, believing, knowing that the more sacred we hold in memory this past of our southland, the higher, the broader and truer will be our loyalty to our united common country—submission, loving, yet proud tears for the furled banner of the southern cross; patriotic joy, hope and pride in the unfurled, out-spread, world advancing flag of our fathers and our Union.

We now present this monument to the coming metropolis of the south. . . to the foremost state of the southland and. . . to our whole country—south and north—west and east. We doubt not its acceptance in sacred trust as a memorial of American valor and American patriotism. . . .

The “eloquent sentences” of Dr. Russell M. Cunningham, Lieutenant Governor of the State of Alabama, which followed the presentation of the monument, were covered extensively in the *Age-Herald* account of the day’s ceremonies. The remarks of Mayor Drennen were not reported.

Dr. Cunningham stated:

We are here today as one people under one flag, and as citizens of an indissoluble union, to honor one side of the great struggle that made these things so. A monument erected to the Confederate or Federal

soldier is a monument to American patriotism, courage and valor, and is a cause for rejoicing of all who honor conscientious conviction and fearlessness in maintaining it. Neither Confederate nor Federal will be lost to the future, for they will live in history.

Notwithstanding this it is meet and proper that their memory should be perpetuated also in bronze and stone as a constant reminder to us of their honor and glory and achievement. The unquarried stone exposed to the agencies of nature rots and decays. The quarried and polished stone, beautiful and adorned by art, withstands the vicissitudes of time. So it is with memory. Left to itself it may forget and decay; but revered it recalls the past and does honor to whom honor is due. To this end this monument, erected to the memory of the Confederate soldier, will stand.

To each passerby it will recall the past, and his heart will swell with joy and pride in remembrance of those for whom it stands. In reality it is still, silent, cold. Figuratively it moves, breathes and throbs as it symbolizes the energy and endurance, courage and bravery, patriotism and devotion of the Confederate soldier. It speaks for the dead, that their memory may never be forgotten; it speaks to the living that the virtues of the dead may be ever emulated. It stands as a memorial of the past, as an inspiration to the present, as a prophecy of the future. For it stands for conviction, honor, country.

Dr. Cunningham’s remarks articulated the sentiment of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in working to raise the monument. They wanted Confederate soldiers to be remembered as patriots who died in the service of their land for what they believed.

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Mrs. Rountree

Mrs. J. A. Rountree (Jennie Maude McIver), president of the Pelham chapter in 1905, was a remarkable woman whose tireless community service to American soldiers and veterans extended through World War I. A writer of note, she not only helped organize the local UDC chapter and raise funds for the monument but also chaired relief work provided by 35 UDC chapters under the Red Cross during World War I. The ladies raised \$25,000,000 for relief efforts and endowed seven hospital wards in France.

Mrs. Rountree's family members fought in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War I. She promoted a national medal for, and documented, Southern veterans of the Civil War who also served in World War I. Her son, Asa Rountree, who served as an aviator during World War I, dedicated his poem "The Southern Patriot" to his mother:

Our family fought with Washington
And again with Robert Lee
And I shall serve with Pershing
In his fight across the sea;

You've wrapped me in Old Glory's folds
Almost since I was born,
And now I cannot stand aside
And see its colors torn;

And when you think, as think you will,
Of what my fate may be,
Try not to worry, mother dear,
For what may come to me;

A man in dying dies but once,
Small matter where or when,
'Tis not his death, but how he lived,
That counts with God and men;

So I shall go, and go at once,
You would not hold me here,
Our family always is among
The first who volunteer.