

# Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY  
NEWSLETTER

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*"Remove not the ancient Landmark"*

Fall 2018

## George B. Rogers: Mobile's Edwardian Architect

### Part I: His career in Mobile up until World War I

This is the third in a series on architects who made a difference in changing the face of Mobile. First was Thomas James (1803-1862) who helped create many of Mobile's most enduring antebellum structures. Next up was Rudolph Benz (1847-1906), a German immigrant who somewhat ironically created a number of the city's most beautiful buildings in the popular Queen Ann style. Not long before Mr. Benz died, a newcomer arrived in the Port City who would change the face of the city for the next four decades: George B. Rogers. All three are permanent residents of Magnolia Cemetery.

#### A Chicagoan

George Rogers was born in Chicago, but that is about the only fact historians can agree upon. The exact year has never been determined. Rogers' life insurance policy stated it was 1873 but he always said he was a babe in arms during the famous Chicago fire of 1871. Elsewhere Rogers gave his birth date as October 16, 1870. His parents were Samuel and Martha Renick Rogers.

Research has found that the Rogers family had relocated to Circleville, Ohio by the time Rogers entered elementary school in 1876. The 1880 census places the family there and reveals that his mother, Martha Renick Rogers, age 40, was a widow living with three sons: Renick (16), George (10) and D. J. (8).

Circleville, a small town in central Ohio, was apparently his father's hometown. He is listed there on the 1850 census which reveals that his father, Samuel, Sr. was a prosperous dry goods merchant. At some point during the family's stay in Circleville, George Rogers lost his father.

The next appearance of the family is in an 1897 city directory for Little Rock, Arkansas; Martha is listed as a widow living with sons "Dejay" a pharmacist, and Renick



*George Bigelow Rogers*

whose occupation is listed as "bookkeeper." The 1900 federal census places them in Little Rock as well but there is no mention of the middle son, George in the census or city directories.

#### Connecticut (1893-1901)

No further information appears about George until he entered New York Military Academy. Nothing is known about his whereabouts between 1876 and 1893 when he was listed in the city directory for Hartford, Conn.

Rogers' would later state that those years were filled with the study of architecture at M.I.T., Columbia and travel abroad. No record of his attendance has been found at either school but apparently he was living in both Boston and New York City during some part of that time frame.

Rogers' architectural education appears to have consisted of a drafting apprenticeship and what he taught himself from books and later travel. The end result was an architect who could appreciate the architectural strength of a steel frame but cover it in a classical sheath.

In 1893 Rogers appeared in the Hartford city directory where his occupation was given as "draughtsman" for

architect Willis E. Becker. Two years later he was in the employ of Albert W. Scoville. Scoville had been a contractor and builder in Hartford for decades. And while Scoville called himself an architect, he was not. He employed draftsmen to create the architectural plans from which he worked and also used the services of actual architects in Hartford.

In 1895 George Rogers worked on the plans for an addition to the Hartford Times Building as well as a mechanical building for the paper which was completed in 1897. The Times building was a four story building faced in brownstone. The mechanical building stood two stories and its first floor was faced with three roman arches—a design he would later incorporate in the design of the courtyard of the Bellingrath Home nearly four decades later.

Rogers was listed in the 1896 city directory showing he had moved out of the local YMCA and his occupation was given as architect. According to the 1900 census, Rogers was living in a boarding house and his entry indicates that the birthplace of both of his parents was “unknown.” It seems doubtful Rogers would have been denying his parentage. It is more likely that he was not at home when the census taker stopped by and his landlady provided what information she had.

According to Rogers, he took a vacation in 1901 heading south. His planned destination was Mexico where he planned to study Spanish inspired architecture but he never made it. The train had a stop in Mobile, AL, and neither Rogers nor his adopted city would ever be the same.

### Mobile and Marriage

George Rogers first appears in Mobile’s 1902 city directory with a listing as an architect with an office at “38 YMCA Bldg.” The YMCA Building stood on the northeast corner of Government and Conception streets and dated to 1899. It originally had areas designated for social as well as athletic functions but apparently had office space as well. Two years later he had moved across the street to the first floor of the Fidelia Clubhouse which was leased out for office space. He shared the floor with the Christian Science Reading Room.

His residential address for his first four years was given as 112 St. Joseph Street where a widow named Lillian Higley operated a boarding house. In February of 1907 Rogers married Carolyn Lucille Ulmer. A short newspaper item announced:

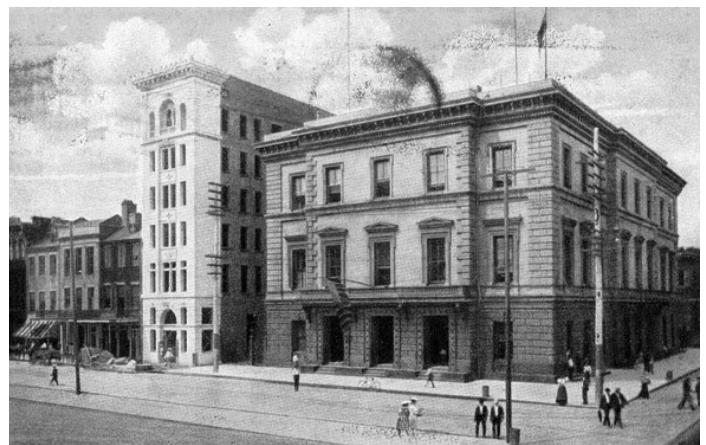
*Mrs. Martha Maxwell Ulmer has issued announcement cards of the marriage of her daughter, Carolyn, to Mr. George Bigelow Rogers. The wedding took place at 206 St. Louis Street. Mr. and Mrs. Rogers will be at home after the 1st of March at 205 Government Street.*

Carolyn Ulmer was one of two daughters of John and Martha Ulmer of Camden, Ala. John Ulmer had died in 1878 and his widow later moved to Mobile where she lived with her older daughter Rebecca Ulmer Lyon and her husband, George. George Lyon was also a Black Belt transplant. He had grown up in Demopolis, received a BA from the University of Alabama and then studied to be a homeopathic physician in Cincinnati.

The address given as home to the newlyweds was the long time residence of the Shawhan family. According to the 1900 and 1910 census records the house was occupied by Mary Shawhan, a widow, along with her daughter and son in law, Louis Horn, their three daughters and an Irish cook. Apparently the ante bellum home which stood just east of the new Elks Lodge had sufficient room for the Rogers as well.

By 1908 the couple’s residence was on Palmetto Street, but they would later be listed on Church Street in 1912 and South Georgia Avenue in 1918. In 1920 the Rogers moved to a home on Selma Street which they would occupy for another 20 years.

### His Career Begins: Commercial Design



*City Bank Building (center) on Royal Street*

Rogers gave Mobile two of its tallest buildings: City Bank Building and the Van Antwerp Building.

City Bank and Trust Company had been founded in 1899 as the City National Bank. In 1903 it got a new name and a new seven story headquarters with entrances on both Royal and St. Joseph streets in what was termed

“the Italian Renaissance style” at a cost of \$350,000. The first floor held the bank which featured a lavish display of marble and bronze fittings beneath an elaborate plaster ceiling. The six floors above held 90 offices which were accessed by two “high speed elevators.”

In 1911 the building was widened and heightened to nine stories by Rogers. Just four years later City Bank and Trust failed and was purchased by the First National Bank which relocated here. The structure, like the historic Customs House to the north would fall victim to the bank tower completed in 1964.

The Van Antwerp family hired Rogers to design a combination office building and drug store on the south west corner of Dauphin and Royal streets, completed between 1906 and 1908. The \$200,000 project was Mobile’s first true skyscraper at 10 stories. Covered in cream terra-cotta, the gleaming structure surely stood out among its smaller brick neighbors.

When the owners complained that tenants were hesitating on renting on the upper floors, Rogers moved his office onto the tenth floor and would remain there for decades.

In 1906 he was hired to design what would be touted as “the biggest laundry in the United States.” According to the 1906 newspaper account, Rogers had joined the owner, Dr. William L. Woodruff on a cross country tour to visit steam laundries.

The resulting structure of fireproof “armored concrete” occupied a lot on St. Emmanuel Street mid block between



*Van Antwerp Building – Mobile’s first and oldest skyscraper.*

Dauphin and Conti streets. Each of the four floors had a specialized department. The ground floor handled men’s detachable shirt collars and cuffs. The second was for “hotel work and linens” while “family work” was handled up on the third floor. The top story was devoted entirely to laundering shirts.

The ambitious venture lasted about a decade. Dr. Woodruff and his family moved out of town and his former laundry became the new home of Gayfer’s Department Store. That firm had lost two earlier locations to fire so the fireproof nature of their new home must surely have offered a degree of relief.

### **Residential Design**

By 1904 George Rogers was being called upon by prominent Mobilians to design their new homes. In that year he was involved in the design of half a dozen mansions along Government Street.



*Lavretta House-still standing but largely hidden.*

- Constantine Lawrence Lavretta, a former mayor of Mobile had Rogers design a two story stucco mansion on the north east corner of Lawrence Street. Rogers termed the exterior “Italian Renaissance” and decorated the interior giving the family an “Italian” entrance hall, a Louis XIV parlor and a “Tyrolean” dining room. The house survives but is buried beneath a late 1950’s commercial façade.

- Edward J. Buck, president of the City Bank and Trust Company hired Rogers to remodel, modernize and enlarge his 1865 home on the south side of the street at 1005 Government Street, just east of Chatham Street. He stuccoed the façade in a manner reminiscent of the Bank of Mobile, added a new front porch and fitted the interior with pine and mahogany paneling, a new heating system, and a large conservatory.

- Clarence P. Robinson, a dentist, hired Rogers to design the columned colonial revival house at 1200 Government Street. That home was converted into the Mobile Women's Club in 1929.
- For cotton factor David R. Burgess, Rogers designed what the local paper termed "the costliest and handsomest residence in the city." Built of grey brick with a green tiled roof, this Italian Renaissance showplace still stands at 1209 Government Street.
- Future mayor Harry T. Hartwell's home was described as being located at the "western end" of Government Street, on the north east corner of Houston Street. Like the Lavretta and Buck houses, its exterior was covered with smooth light colored stucco which was scored to imitate stone.
- And in the block just west of the Hartwell home Rogers designed two houses for William K. Syson, a lumber broker, and his father-in-law real estate developer George Fearn. The Syson home on the corner features rough stuccoed walls while to the west, the Fearn house has smooth walls and a traditional Spanish Mission style with a red tiled roof. Both were completed by 1905 and Fearn's Ashland Place subdivision would feature gates designed by Rogers.

### Remodeling – Commercial and Residential

One of Rogers' first commissions in 1903 was the overhauling of the Emanuel Building on the north east corner of Royal and St. Michael Streets. A row of mid-19th century brick buildings was combined and covered with a cream stucco façade with the corner designed to hold the Bank of Mobile. A 1904 postcard image promoting the bank notes "This bank is proof that confidence capitalizes opportunity." Despite all of that confidence, the bank failed in 1917 and the corner today is home to the Ruby Slipper Café.

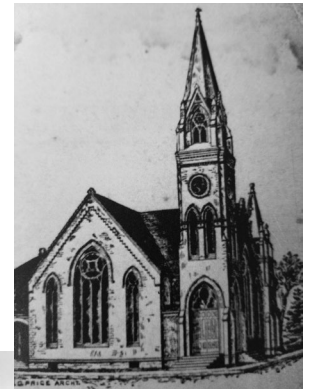


*Ashland – remodeled only to be lost in a blaze.*

Members of the Government Street Methodist Church hired Rogers in 1905 to construct a "Sunday school room." Eventually that room was an entire Sunday school wing and over a 12 year period the former Gothic brick church had been remodeled into a Catholic Baroque structure which still graces the south west corner of Government and Broad streets.

*Government Street Methodist Church – before remodeling.*

*And After.*



While Rogers designed many new mansions, he also had a talent for remodeling existing homes, some of which were quite historic. Around 1908 he was hired to modernize "Ashland," the former home of writer Augusta Evans Wilson. He installed new bathrooms, a kitchen and up to date central heat to this mansion which centered Ashland Place, a gated subdivision fronting Spring Hill Avenue. While the subdivision flourishes today, the house at its center went up in flames in May of 1926.

In 1910 attorney Stewart Brooks hired Rogers to enlarge his family home at what today is numbered 1204 Government Street. In the early 1870's auctioneer Leslie Brooks purchased a five room cottage on the lot. With George Rogers' assistance his son's home now featured an impressive brick façade with Turdoresque overtones.

In 1893, attorney Gregory Little Smith had built a magnificent six bedroom home at 1115 Government Street in a style the newspaper termed "English casteladed and

Louis XVI styles with a sprinkling of classic introduced during the construction.”

By 1912 the Rudolph Benz design with its turret and gingerbread was apparently thought to be a bit dated. Rogers stripped the Benz design off and provided a two story porch across the façade supported by fluted Ionic columns. The whole structure was given a gleaming white enamel finish and the house would survive into the early 1980's. By that time it was operating as a boarding house and the cause of the fire which destroyed it has never been explained. A Taco Bell franchise fills the lot today.

### Clubs

George Rogers had barely arrived in Mobile when he was invited to join the Athelstan Club in 1902. That was also the year the club had completed a grand new club house on the north side of Bienville Square featuring two stories of club space above a rathskeller. Although Rogers had nothing to do with its original design he would be hired to enlarge the club to the north by adding a ballroom in 1909.

He started his club designs in Mobile with a home for the Mobile Yacht Club which was completed in August of 1907 at a cost of \$18,000. The two story shingled structure stood at the end of a 1500 foot long wharf fronting Monroe Park, and was surrounded by open porches. The roof was topped by a flag pole as well as a pair of what the newspaper termed “Italian pergolas” offering views of the bay.

The unique structure was a center of waterfront activity until the 1916 hurricane destroyed it. Members were

in the building as the storm struck and crawled to shore as waves crashed over them and the entire club house collapsed behind them. Miraculously no lives were lost.

In 1916 members of the Fidelity Club hired him to design a new club house further west on Government Street. Unlike their original home which had included a ground floor available for office lease income, this two story building was all club house. The exterior was covered in smooth stucco and the roof was covered in red tile.

When membership declined during the early years of the Depression the club folded and the building was occupied for a far longer time by Higgins Mortuary. The site now holds a McDonald's franchise.

In 1917 the Country Club of Mobile moved to its current location and Rogers was hired to design it. The result was a handsome three story shingled structure featuring arched casement windows and deep porches offering breezes and views of the landscape. The third floor included an apartment for the resident golf pro.

As the United States entered World War I, Mobile's building boom slowed and it would not be until war's end that the local economy and Rogers' commissions would rebound.

*Part II: The Winter Messenger will take a look at Rogers' work from 1920 until his death in 1945.*

—Tom McGehee



*Mobile Yacht Club was reduced to its pilings in the 1916 hurricane.*



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Fall 2018

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# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*The year is nearly gone, but 2018 has had many successes for the Friends, thanks to the support of its members. Among recent accomplishments:*



*L. M. Wilson Mausoleum after restoration.*

• *The restoration Committee headed by Douglas B. Kearley has had an especially productive year. The crumbling roof of the mausoleum of streetcar magnate Lorenzo Madison Wilson has been repaired and sealed. The fence had earlier been restored with missing elements fabricated.*

• *Two large urns which once graced the grounds of Georgia Cottage were donated to the Friends. Brick bases were placed at the entrance of the lot containing the former occupants of that historic property: Matthew and Sarah Evans and their famous daughter, author Augusta Evans Wilson.*

• *The fencing surrounding the Hebrew Burial Ground is now complete thanks to generous grants received from the Ben May Foundation as well as the Friends. It matches the fence which was apparently removed sometime in the 1940's.*

• *Landscaping improvements continue. Flowerbeds are kept freshened with seasonal blooms and for the year just ending, 32 trees have been planted and are doing well.*

*I invite you to come visit Magnolia Cemetery soon. Autumn is a wonderful time to take in one of the free walking tours offered the first three Saturdays in November and our flags lining our Avenue of Heroes will be in time for Veteran's Day on November 11th.*

*In October our annual membership renewal drive began. I hope that you have had the opportunity to return your renewal. If it has gone astray a form appears in this issue and can also be used to give a gift membership to someone on your gift list during the upcoming Christmas season.*



*Hebrew Rest fencing is now complete.*

*Tom McGehee  
President*



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- Please find enclosed my tax-deductible membership contribution of \$35.
- I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery.
- I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Perpetual Care Trust Fund.
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