

Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY
NEWSLETTER

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"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Fall 2019

Architect George B. Rogers, Part II

Mobile's economy was disrupted by the eruption of World War I in 1914. Many of the port's most important customers were in Europe, and foreign ports were rapidly being shut down. The sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 just made things worse. The U.S. entered the fray two years later and by the time the Armistice was signed in November of 1918, Mobilians were ready to get their economy back into gear.

Architect George Roger's career seems to have been hit hard by the effects of Mobile's wartime depression. Rogers' commission for the new clubhouse for the Mobile Country Club in 1917 would apparently be his last until he was called upon in 1920 to construct what remains one of Alabama's most unique structures: The Scottish Rite Bodies Egyptian Temple.

Mobile's Egyptian Temple

The organization had purchased the former St. Francis Street Baptist Church after the congregation's move to Government Street in 1906. That year's hurricane had relieved the church of its large steeple and the Masons started on a major renovation to create a meeting space which was dedicated in 1910. In the years after World War I the organization enjoyed remarkable growth and the former church space was outgrown.

Rogers created Mobile's first and only Egyptian Revival structure to serve as a Cathedral for the Scottish Rite Masons. In doing so, Rogers demolished most of the old Baptist church but retained the south west corner which he incorporated into the new structure.

At its completion in 1922, a newspaper account noted the large auditorium within measured 120 by 74 feet and which could be used "free of charge" by visiting conventions since it was three times larger than any other hall in the city. It also became the setting for the commencement exercises for Barton Academy. The first floor was also equipped with a large kitchen for banquets.



Following the lean years from the financial slump of World War I, Rogers was commissioned to design a "Cathedral" for the Scottish Rite. It took the form of an ancient Egyptian temple.

The floors above the auditorium held the lodge rooms beneath a roof garden featuring a stage flanked by pylons. The space could be tented and used as an outdoor meeting space during the summer months. In later years the membership of the Scottish Rite dwindled and the building was sold. It survives as an event space today.

After creating Mobile's largest auditorium, Rogers was next hired to create one of Mobile's most beautiful homes.

The Hunter House

Lumber exporter Thomas Shannon Hunter and his wife Caroline were residing on the north side of Government Street, one door east of the house Rogers had designed for attorney Frank Overall in 1907. Both lots today house a gasoline station and its adjoining car wash.

Hunter obtained the lot on the north west corner of Old Shell Road and Tuthill Lane which had once held the home of George and Phoebe Tuthill. After that house burned in 1897, the widowed Mrs. Tuthill retreated to what had once been a servant's cottage on the large lot. A young Caroline Hunter had been spending the night with friends and witnessed the fire, little dreaming at the time her future home would be built on its ashes.



Rogers' design work took a turn for a purer interpretation of historical architecture in the 1920's. Here is the Shannon Hunter home in Spring Hill, a Georgian classic.

Rogers admired the ancient oaks and camellias on the property, as well as the original entrance drive from Old Shell Road. He designed a handsome Georgian home and placed it on the footprint of the earlier house. When it was finished, the mature plantings and original drive gave the impression of a much older residence to the architect's delight.

The classic Georgian styling of the home was a departure for Rogers from his pre-war design. Although he had certainly designed houses in the Colonial Revival style they had a heavier look than his designs of the 1920's.

A New Church

At about the same time Rogers was designing the Hunter home, he was called upon to create a new sanctuary for Mobile's Christian Scientists. The congregation had been meeting on the ground floor of the Fidelia Building since the early 1900's. The Fidelia Club which had been founded by a group of Mobile's most prominent Jewish residents occupied the upper floors but rented the street level out as office space.

In 1915 the club had Rogers design a new clubhouse further west on Government Street. Unable to find a group wanting their former clubhouse it was announced that it would be demolished to provide a location for a department store. This apparently prompted the Christian Scientists to hire George Rogers in 1921 to design a church building for their use.

A site was purchased on the south west corner of Dauphin and Oakland Terrace in suburban Dauphin Way. Perhaps inspired by the edifices occupied by Mobile's Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Baptists, Rogers turned to the Greek revival. The handsome building still survives, although ironically now houses a physician's office rather than Christian Scientists.

Spanish Revival Splendor

Rogers was never one to stick to just one style of architecture and during the 1920's his creations would range from ancient Egypt to sunny Spain.

He had no sooner finished the Hunter house when he was hired to design a new home for William Marshall Turner, president of Turner Supply Company. Turner purchased a large lot on the south east corner of Government and Monterey streets. In stark contrast to the Hunter home, Rogers designed a Spanish Revival mansion with stuccoed walls and a red tiled roof. A large garage beneath servants' quarters completed the property. The reported cost of the project was \$30,000.

A more modest project that year was the Lodge he designed for Walter and Bessie Bellingrath at the center of the Coca Cola bottler's fishing camp on the Fowl River. When the property had been purchased in 1918, there had been two very rustic cabins. One held the kitchen and dining room while the other contained a living room and three bedrooms.

For whatever reason, the Bellingraths did not change the arrangement. Perhaps since the property was not used in the coldest part of the year it did not seem necessary to connect the dining room and kitchen to the new building. The Lodge was bigger than its predecessor and featured a spacious living room with a beamed ceiling. A fireplace included an insert of tile from the National Mosaic Tile Company which had been recently purchased by Mr. Bellingrath. The building also held three bedrooms and two baths. The building was used as a gift shop before its unceremonious demolition in the early 1960's.

The Roaring Twenties

Rogers' clients in the mid-twenties would include three of Mobile's wealthiest citizens.



Newspaper publisher Frederick Ingate Thompson had Rogers greatly enlarge his mid-19th century home on Spring Hill Avenue in the mid-twenties. The 25 room mansion at 1621 Spring Hill Avenue was allowed to slide into dereliction thanks to his alcoholic daughter. It was replaced by a series of unimaginative brick apartments by the mid-1960's.

In 1924 Rogers was called upon by newspaper publisher Frederick Ingate Thompson to enlarge an ante-bellum home standing on the south side of Spring Hill Avenue near Lyons Park. Thompson had purchased the house in 1910 and had built a considerable fortune with the ownership of several Alabama newspapers, including Mobile's Register and News Item.

By 1925 the enlargement was complete. The house was expanded to hold 25 rooms with an entrance hall 100 feet in length. The addition included a ballroom and the property boasted elaborate gardens overseen by a full time gardener. Another staff member was always equipped with a can of white paint touching up any paint chip.

After Thompson died the house ended up in the hands of his daughter who let the home fall into ruin filled with stray cats and yapping dogs. The house met the wreckers following her death when no contractor in town would even consider remodeling it.

Another wealthy client was John Howard Wilson whose fortunes had risen with his ownership and expansion of the street railway system. He called upon Rogers to remodel the house he had owned at 1119 Government Street since 1901. Like Thompson, the Wilsons wanted the house enlarged and remodeled. Sadly no photographs exist of the house as it was before Rogers got to work on it, but the result was a façade reminiscent of Washington's Mount Vernon with full height box columns surmounted by an elegant series of Chippendale style railings.

The entrance hall received a new staircase along with very expensive wallpaper by Zuber featuring panoramic scenes. A large glass enclosed sun porch with wicker furniture was added as well. The light colors used were a drastic change from the dark woods preferred in the late Victorian era.

Wilson purchased the house to the west and demolished it to make room for elegant gardens which stretched back to Church Street. The property would become a staple of the city's Azalea Trail well into the 1950's. By 1959 its owner had moved to west of the city limits and the house was demolished for a short-lived motel.

The third major residential property to be renovated by Rogers in the middle of the decade was for banana baron Ashbel Hubbard. Hubbard had purchased a handsome mansion at 1060 Government Street in 1907 with his wife Emma. As a principal in United Fruit Company, Hubbard was one of the city's wealthiest citizens.

So, when Ashbel asked for a divorce in 1919, it was newsworthy. His choice in her replacement was even



John Howard Wilson made a fortune in real estate and owned the electric trolley line as well as Monroe Park. Rogers remodeled his Victorian home at 1119 Government Street into a mansion reminiscent of Mount Vernon in the 1920's. A motel replaced it less than 40 years later.

more fodder for gossip since she was 30 years his junior. Ashbel hired George Rogers to remodel and enlarge the house for his young bride and that's just what he did. When he was finished the light concrete exterior had been bricked over and topped by a hip roof of red tile. The price tag: \$60,000.

After Debe's death the house was remodeled for the YWCA which added a motel-like wing to the west. A church now operates a day care facility in that building and uses the main house for special events.

From Schools to a Library

Aside from residential work, Rogers assisted with Murphy High School and designed the gleaming white marble memorial on Government Street honoring Mobilians lost in the world war completed in 1926. Two years later his design for the Mobile Public Library was complete.

The busy decade of 1920's ended with a commission in 1929 to construct an annex to the First National Bank.



Mobile's First National Bank hired Rogers to design an annex to house their trust department and office space in the pivotal year of 1929. Much of the block was demolished for the bank's 1964 tower.

Ironically this addition was built on St. Joseph Street adjoining his early designs for the City National Bank completed 25 years earlier. The handsome annex was beautifully designed with large arched windows to complement the earlier structure.

Rogers was also hired in 1929 by the parents of a former Spring Hill student to design a library in his memory. The Thomas Byrne Memorial Library was completed in 1930 and its styling was based on Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statehouse, completed in 1789. One of the interesting features of the new library was a caged room for books banned by the Catholic church.

Both the library and bank annex were well underway when the stock market crashed and the building and remodeling boom which had kept Rogers busy came to a sudden end.

The Gardens that Coke Built

George Rogers had been assisting the Bellingraths with the grounds around their camp house since 1927 and luckily for him their finances had not been greatly impacted by the problems of Wall Street. Americans were struggling but they could still afford to spend a nickel on a Coca-Cola.

In 1931 Rogers completed the very recognizable Gardens water features starting with a bubbling urn and ending in a waterfall cascade. He designed and installed a conservatory and adjoining boiler house and followed Mrs. Bellingrath's design idea for the Rockery. He created Mirror Lake and its rustic bridge leading back to a summer house with cast iron supports.

The property opened to the public in 1932 as Bellingrath Gardens. The Bellingraths had planned for the property to be a spring attraction and that once the camellias and azaleas faded it would go back to being their private camp.



Coca-Cola bottler Walter Bellingrath had Rogers enlarge his fishing lodge in the early 1920's. Here is a view of the living room, ca. 1930. That building was demolished in 1962 but elements of the interior design are reflected in the interior of the nearby Chapel completed in 1939.



Commissions from the Bellingraths began again in 1927 when the couple asked for assistance in designing a garden at their camp. A 1935 request to design a home at its center surely helped get him through the depression years. Here is the east side of the house when Rogers finally finished the long awaited terraces and "rock work" which had been delayed well into 1937.

But that was not to be. The public kept appearing day in and day out, ignoring the "Closed to Public" signs affixed to the highway billboards.

In 1934 Bellingrath Gardens became a year round attraction and the Bellingraths soon realized they needed a year-round home at its center. George Rogers designed a 10,500 square foot home and used salvaged brick, ironwork and flagstones from downtown Mobile to disguise a very modern home.

The interiors, like those of the Wilson home, were light and featured a Georgian staircase, Adam style mantles, and pegged oak floors. High ceilings and French doors on both floors allowed a maximum of light as well as cross ventilation. The couple had their first meal in the new house on July 4, 1936.

Interestingly not all went smoothly between the architect and his clients. As early as July 12, 1935 Walter Bellingrath fired off a letter to Rogers which read "in regards to the construction of a house at my Gardens, your delays have been most unreasonable and extremely burdensome to me." And although the home was occupied in the summer of 1936, the terraces surrounding it were still not finished nearly a year later. Rogers received this message dated June 10, 1937: "Bessie and I have reached a point of exasperation over the constant and never ending delay completing the terrace and rock work in front of our home. Patience, which we have exercised to the limit, has ceased to be a virtue and we have become very unhappy over the indefinite delay."

A Two Bedroom Mansion

By 1936, Rogers was starting on the Leo Brown home in Mobile. Brown was an attorney who had married Birdie Eichold and lived with his very wealthy mother-in-law

at 604 Government Street. By that era Mrs. Eichold's two story brick home was sharing the block with the Knights of Columbus to the east and the Seamen's Bethel was across the street. Commercialism was encroaching and Brown selected a vacant lot far to the west at 1668 Government Street.

Rogers opted for English Tudor and not only designed the exterior, but selected the paint colors and fabrics for the interior as well. The wide oak floors are identical to those he used within the Bellingrath Home and both the Bellingrath Lodge and the Brown home had a living room featuring a vaulted ceiling with stained wooden trusses.

The Browns and Mama Eichold moved into the house in 1937, enjoying the comfort of the first residence in Mobile to feature air-conditioning thanks to a water-driven system. And although the home looks quite large it actually contained just two bedrooms.

The Browns were so pleased with their new home that they asked Rogers to design their mausoleum where the couple and Mrs. Eichold now reside permanently within the cemetery of the Springhill Avenue Temple.

Rogers completed the decade by designing a guest house and adjoining chapel for the Bellingraths in 1939. Six cars could be housed on the first floor while three guest rooms and a sitting room occupied the upper level. A small chapel at the southern end features a vaulted ceiling and stained wooden trusses reminiscent of the Lodge.

The Guest House at Bellingrath Gardens was apparently the last structure Rogers designed. But Rogers last commission would involve a permanent memorial for the Bellingraths at Magnolia Cemetery.

According to correspondence dated 1944 with Atlanta's McNeel Marble Company George Rogers was involved with the design of the columned monument marking the Bellingrath-Morse lot at Magnolia Cemetery.



Attorney Leo Brown was the second commission to assist Rogers during the troubled financial years following the stock market collapse. Here is his English Tudor he created for the Browns at 1668 Government Street. Although there were major interior changes to the structure, it survives.

That correspondence noted that the quarries were suffering from a 50% shortage of laborers due to the war, so the final monument was installed sometime after the war's end. It would not be until 1946 that members of the Bellingrath and Morse families gathered at the cemetery for its dedication and by that time, the architect had become a permanent resident of Magnolia.

A Legacy

George Rogers died on October 10, 1945 at the Ashland Place home of his only child, Martha Rogers Lyons. His obituary mentioned that he "was affiliated with all the mystic societies" but mentions he had resigned from all of them four years earlier. This may well have coincided with his memory loss. A neighbor on Levert Avenue recalled working in her garden and seeing Rogers drive in from Old Shell Road. The car would coast to a stop and Mr. Rogers would be staring ahead, seeming trying to remember why he was there. She would step up to the car, smile and ask if he was headed to see Martha. The question would seemingly jumpstart his memory and he would agree and head on down to the Lyons home.



George Rogers designed a classic colonnade towering above the Bellingraths' graves and a unique mausoleum for Leo and Birdie Brown. Here is the stone he designed for himself. Note that there is no birth date on it. His true year of birth was always a mystery along with much of his early training.

Rogers was buried in Magnolia Cemetery beside his mother during a private graveside funeral. A visitation had earlier been held at Roche Mortuary, the current home to Mobile's Carnival Museum. The Rogers-Lyons lot does not contain the remains of Rogers' wife Carolyn who had died in 1941. Mrs. Rogers was buried beside her sister in another lot, some distance away.

When George Rogers' estate was opened, court filings reveal that the city's most prominent architect for four decades had a bank balance of just \$600 and an interest in property in Dallas County, no value given. His legacy to Mobile in the creation of countless buildings and a world class estate garden is surely priceless.

—Tom McGehee



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Fall 2019

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CONSECUTIVE SATURDAYS: 10:00 AM TO 12:00 NOON

November 2, 2019

Topic: *Victorian
Funerary Customs
and Traditions*

November 9, 2019

Topic: *Historic
People and Events*

November 16, 2019

Topic: *Victorian
Funerary Art and
Symbolism*

- Tours are free of charge.
- Advanced reservations are required and space is limited!
- Enter Ann Street Gate or Virginia Street Gate and follow signs!

Guided tours by H. F. "Tighe" Marston, Municipal Cemeteries Manager

For Reservations Call: (251) 208-7307 or (251) 432-8672

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The year is nearly gone, but 2019 has had many successes for the Friends, thanks to the support of its members. Among recent accomplishments:

- *In January we had our Annual Board meeting and elected new Board members and recognized those who were going off the board: Sumner Adams, Tom McGehee and John Holmes Smith. We welcome new member **D. Pratt Paterson**, who is chairing out restoration committee, and returning Board member **Carl Blackwell III** and **Schley Rutherford, Jr.***
- *Mention has been made before about the Friends project, started by Executive Director Janet Savage and Grounds Superintendent, Mark Halseth, called the "Avenue of Heroes" where we fly donated casket flags along the main roadways in the Cemetery on the Memorial Day and Veteran's Day Holiday weekends, but I thought an update was in order- we are now up to 112 flags - 5 from past Board Members 48 from local donations, (only 8 buried in Magnolia) and 59 flags from the other states. It is a truly impressive sight to see these large flags flying. Please make a point to come by on these holidays to see the display. Veteran's Day is November 11th.*
- *The Friends have ordered **8 new iron fence sections** for Magnolia Cemetery Two to the south of the main cemetery which are scheduled to be installed in the Fall of this year. We are still accepting orders for fence sections for memorials or in honor of individuals. If you are interested, please contact the Executive Director.*
- *The Friends have completed the long overdue stucco restoration of the **Lorenzo M. Wilson Mausoleum**. Included in the repairs was a replica of the finial that tops the structure, lost due to a lightning strike a number of years ago.*
- *Tige Marston, City Cemetery Manager and Janet Savage have presented several **walking tours in the cemetery** and Tige has had several off-site presentations to Civic groups and schools. We will continue our tours to acquaint those interested in both history and funerary art with this beautiful Mobile Landmark. Tige and Janet plan to continue with the Series of 3 tours in November. If you would like to attend one or all three of these tours call Tige at 208-7307 or Janet at 432-8672.*

Just a reminder that with the winter rainy season approaching our non-paved roads and alleys can be impassable, so please only drive only on the paved roads.

I hope that you have received your membership renewal and had a chance to respond. We can't do all of this without the support of our Friends!

*Douglas Burtu Kearley, Sr.
President*

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Friends of Magnolia Cemetery • P. O. Box 6383 • Mobile, Alabama 36660
(251) 432-8672

- 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.
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