

# MAGNOLIA MESSENGER



The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery

*"Remove not the ancient Landmark"*

Spring 2009

## *Josiah Clark Nott, M.D.*

### **Josiah Clark Nott, M.D.**

In 1867 Mobile's most prominent citizens crowded the main dining room of the Battle House to say farewell to Dr. Josiah Nott. The newspaper reported that the *cellars had been emptied of the light claret of Bordeaux, the heady grape juice of Burgundy, the topaze sherry, the sparkling Moselle and Champagne of every vintage.*

Champagne toasts from prominent politicians, physicians, and businessmen brought tears as the city said goodbye to one of its most famous citizens. Poems were read aloud and songs were sung at the event.

Dr. Nott, one of the city's most beloved and respected physicians was leaving the city after more than 30 years. Only illness and death would make him return.

### **From South Carolina to Paris**

Josiah Nott was born in Columbia, S.C. in 1804. His father, Abraham Nott, was a Connecticut native who had moved to South Carolina where he was elected to congress in 1800. As a judge he served as president of the South Carolina Court of Appeals.

Josiah graduated from medical school at the University of Pennsylvania in 1826 and he was admitted to a year's residency at the Philadelphia Almshouse, a charitable hospital where he observed a wide variety of patients. He was able also to work with some of the most experienced physicians in the U.S. Afterwards he was hired at his alma mater as a demonstrator of anatomy from 1828-29.

Dr. Nott moved back to Columbia where he successfully practiced medicine for six years. He married Sarah (Sally) Deas in

1832 and their first two children, James Deas and Edward Fisher were born in 1833 and 1834.

Dr. Nott and his family left for Paris in the spring of 1835 so that he could pursue medical studies. Paris at the time has been described as having been a

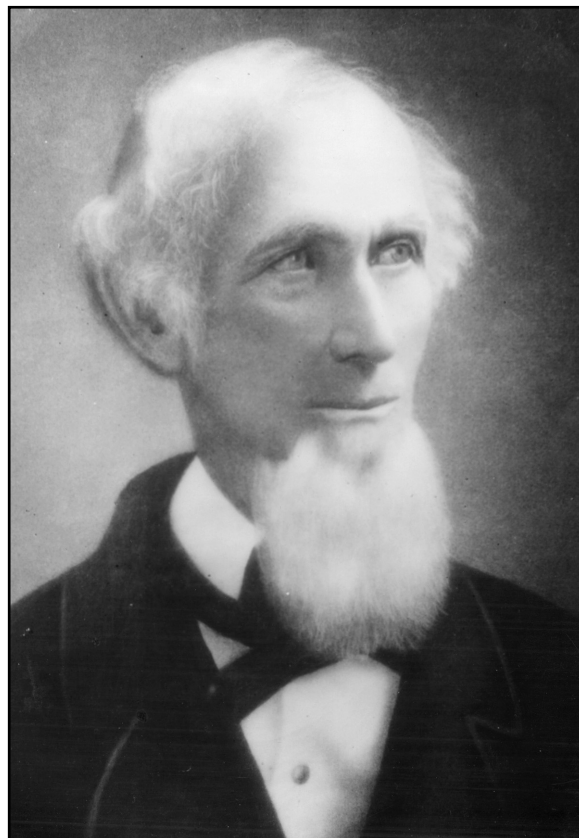
Mecca for the study of clinical medicine. It has been estimated that during the 1830's more than 200 Americans were in the city for the study of medicine. Medical students were able to closely observe the most modern medical techniques at numerous hospitals and clinics there.

Dr. Nott spent his time studying surgery and general science. The glamour of Paris for this young couple must surely have been dimmed with the death of their first born there in 1836. Upon their return to South Carolina the baby was buried in Columbia. His marker reads: *It is some consolation to those who loved him most to know that he sleeps in his native land amidst the tombs of his ancestors.*

### **Mobile**

There was a steady flow of South Carolinians headed to Alabama in the 1830's. Sarah Nott's father had moved to Mobile while the couple had been in Europe, and the Deas family had a spacious home in Spring Hill as well as one in town. The Notts emigrated to the boomtown of Mobile in 1836.

Dr. Nott went into practice with a former classmate of his from the University of Pennsylvania: Richard Lee Fearn. Fearn was a Virginian by birth but he had made his way to Mobile a few years earlier and was serving as surgeon at City Hospital. Their office was at 62 Royal Street. After nearly a decade, Josiah Nott would go out on his own.



**Josiah C. Nott (1804 -1873)**

*Courtesy of USA Archives*

## Mobile and the Yellow Fever

In 1845 Dr. Nott had his office and residence in a large house on the north east corner of St. Francis and St. Joseph streets. No photographs were found of the structure but it was described as elegant and having been surrounded by a cast iron balcony. The corner has held the Merchants National Bank Building since 1929.

By 1838 two more sons had been born to the Notts: James Deas (II) and Henry. Four years later in 1842 Emma arrived followed by Josiah, Jr. in 1845. In another four years Sarah Alice arrived followed by the baby, Allen Huger in 1852. The household must have been an active one with seven children ranging from an infant to an 18 year old.



*An angelic figure gazes upward at four cherubs symbolizing the four Nott children who died in the epidemic of 1853.*

The following year Mobile was struck with one of the worst yellow fever epidemics in its history. From August 1 until the first of November the deaths mounted, each day's interments listed in the daily papers. The final tally was 1,331 while Mobile's population had only been around 25,000.

A September newspaper account noted that Mobilians were not just at threat from disease. The residence of G. M. Parker on St. Louis Street burned to the ground with an estimated \$4,500.00 loss. It was unoccupied at the time, its owners having fled to the country to escape the epidemic. The newspaper stated it was arson while adding:

*We would warn our citizens against leaving their houses uninhabited, there being a set of scoundrels about who choose this time of sickness for their depredations.*



*The spaniel who vigilantly watched over the four Nott children lost to yellow fever, ultimately pined himself to death. Dr. Nott memorialized him in cast iron and placed him at his children's feet.*

On that same day it was noted in the interments, "Wife of Dr. Usher...., Son of Dr. Usher... cause of death...yellow fever." Dr. Usher was not the only physician suffering loss that month.

Perhaps no other home in Mobile suffered the level of abject grief that September which struck the Nott family. Sarah Alice, age 3, succumbed to the fever on September 15<sup>th</sup>. Three days later Emma, 10, died. Four more days passed and their year old brother Allen was gone. The following day their brother Edward was dead at 19.

Throughout the days of sickness the family dog had kept a bedside vigil. With the fourth child's loss he pined himself to death within the week.

There are two grave markers for the children. A tall marker is decorated with four cherubs above "Our Beloved Children." This one is dedicated on the reverse to Emma and Edward. Opposite this is a smaller marker dedicated to Sarah Alice and Allen.

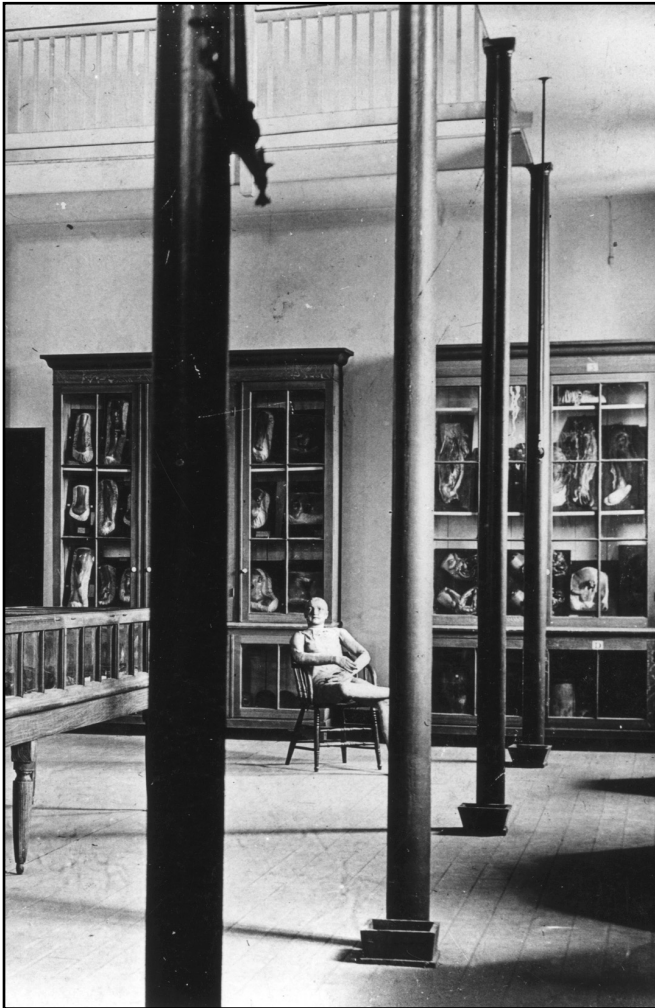
Perhaps in the great numbers of dead from the fever that fall, matching markers were not possible. What makes these graves even more poignant is the cast iron spaniel patiently waiting at their feet between them. Dr. Nott thus memorialized his children's faithful companion.

The Nott household in the course of five days had lost four members. As the cooler weather signaled the end of the fever, there were just three sons left: James Deas, Henry and Josiah, Jr.

## Dr. Nott's Research

Josiah Nott had suffered tremendous pain in losing his four children to an epidemic. It is unknown how many of his friends, patients and neighbors he had watched die in agony, unable to do anything but offer his warm bedside manner and solace.

Nott was first and foremost a scientist. Although his wife was an Episcopalian and he had come from a Presbyterian family, Nott had no use for religion. His mind could not accept the miracles of the New Testament, the idea of the Trinity or the age of the earth as estimated from Biblical sources. He used to joke that the city's top clergy disliked his views on religion but he was the doctor



*A view of part of Dr. Nott's medical museum within the Medical College of Alabama. He had traveled to Europe to purchase books, instruments and specimens for the medical school.*

*Courtesy: USA Archives*

they sought out when illness struck.

Science was Nott's religion, and its leaders in the 1850's believed yellow fever was spread by mysterious noxious ground fumes that were emitted at night. Dr. Nott disputed this idea.

As early as 1848 he had written an essay theorizing that the disease was carried by insects such as mosquitoes. It would be more than 50 years before Dr. Walter Reed proved him right.

## From Hypnosis to Ethnology

In addition to his medical practice, Josiah Nott wrote numerous papers on medical and scientific subjects. He recognized the connections between the human mind and disease and was an early proponent of hypnosis. He had success curing nervous headaches with its use and even used it in extracting teeth.

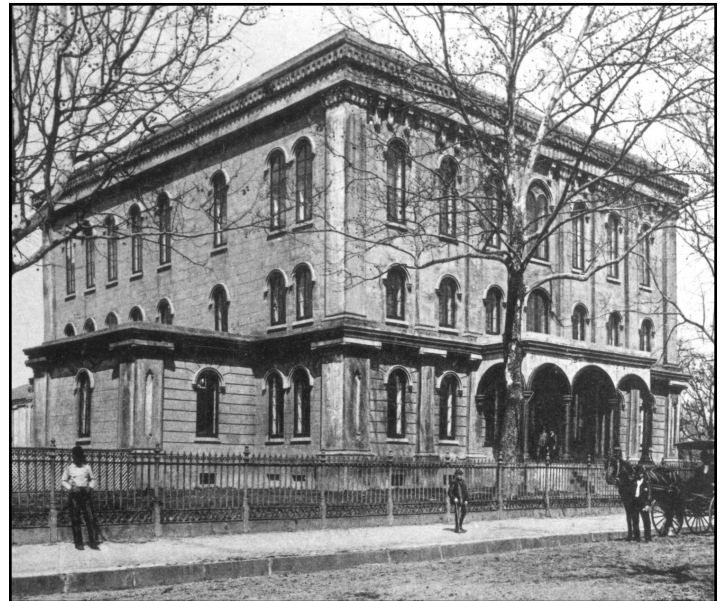
Nott has been vilified by some 21<sup>st</sup> century historians for his belief in what was known as ethnology. Dr. Nott believed that mankind was made up of different races and that these races could not have descended from just one source. Darwin would disprove these ideas later in the century.

He also followed the research of scientists who measured the size of human skulls and concluded that the brains of Africans were smaller than those of Caucasians equating this with a lack of intelligence. Later research completely disproved this idea, but much of that occurred long after Dr. Nott was dead.

## The Medical College of Alabama

In 1857 at the age of 53, Dr. Nott left his practice in Mobile and moved to New Orleans. He had accepted the position as chairman of the anatomy department for the medical school at the University of Louisiana (now Tulane).

While in New Orleans he noticed the number of Alabamians who had left the state for medical school in Louisiana. Further research indicated that Alabama residents were spending some \$200,000 a year to attend out of state medical schools. After just



*The Medical College of Alabama was constructed on St. Anthony Street in 1860 thanks to the efforts of Dr. Nott. This was Alabama's first medical school and at the time one of the most advanced in the United States. In 1920 after graduating hundreds of physicians it fell victim to upstate politics and a lack of funding.*

*Courtesy: USA Archives*

a year in New Orleans, Nott returned to Mobile, determined that Alabama would have a medical college.

Nott raised \$50,000 from individuals and the state to establish the Medical College of Alabama. Students met in rented rooms until 1860 when a building was constructed on St. Anthony Street.

Dr. Nott traveled to Europe to obtain the latest medical instruments and to equip a museum for the college. Anatomical models were essential at a time when human cadavers were difficult to preserve. A model of a human head and neck was obtained in London at the then astronomical cost of \$1,000.

When classes started in 1860 the Medical College of Alabama was one of the best equipped in the nation. The eruption of war ended that.



*Two of Dr. and Mrs. Nott's sons were lost during the Civil War. Their joint monument features a relief of two swords surmounted by a wreath of mourning.*

## The Civil War

Dr. Nott was an ardent secessionist and may not have minded that the students once considering medical school were now off in the war. The medical college closed and was used as a military hospital. Mobile in those early days was caught up in the excitement of military bands and men marching happily off to battle, oblivious of the future slaughter.

Dr. Nott and his family had long summered in Virginia and saw no reason to change in that first year of conflict. As a result, Dr. Nott was able to observe one of the South's early victories.

In a letter dated July 23, 1861, Dr. Nott wrote his brother-in-law in Mobile from Virginia, "I have seen the great and glorious battle of Manassas....No one can imagine such a grand and glorious picture." The excitement of that early victory was no doubt forgotten when Nott lost two of his sons in the war.

A year after Manassas, 24 year old Henry died at Shiloh in south west Tennessee. His older brother Deas, who had obtained the rank of captain, was killed leading a charge at Chickamauga on September 20, 1863. He was 27 and it was ten years to the day

that his brother Edward had died of yellow fever.

A monument was erected in the Nott family lot at Magnolia Cemetery in memory of these two sons lost in wartime. A pair of crossed sabers and a wreath adorn the front and an epitaph states:

*It is a consolation to those who mourn their loss and erect this monument to know they died in defence (sic) of Liberty and left behind untarnished names.*

## Mobile's Fall

Mobile surrendered to the Union in April of 1865. While the city was spared the destruction of war it did not escape the rocky road of federal reconstruction.

At the start of the war Mobile had two exceptional private educational facilities: The Medical College of Alabama and a boys' prep school on Government Street nicknamed the Blue College for its pale blue walls. The latter had been equipped to prepare the cream of Mobile's boys for educations in the best colleges and universities in the nation.

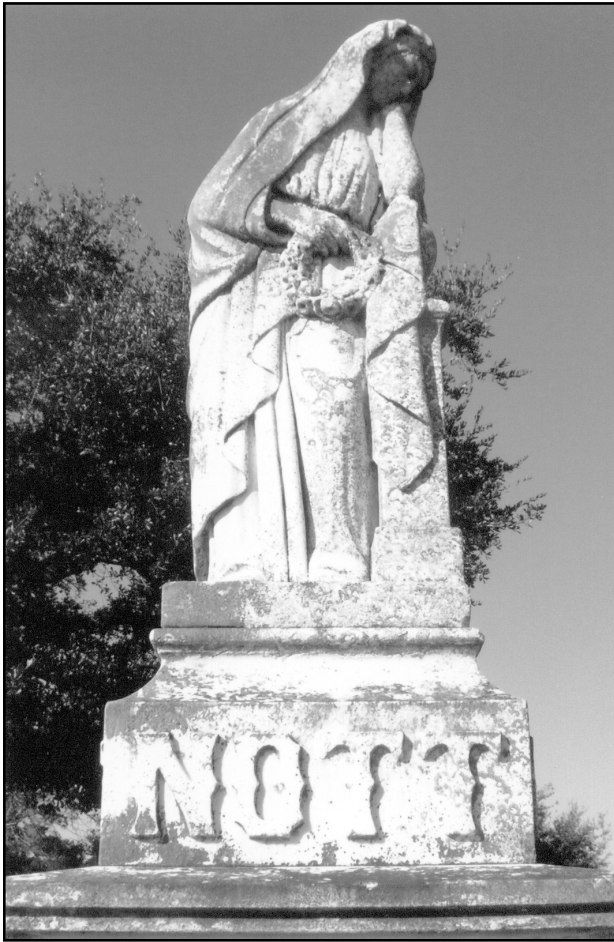
The prep school for the city's elite and the state's well equipped medical college did not go unnoticed by the federal authorities in the city. Both were converted into schools charged with educating the children of recently freed slaves.

No records have been found as to what condition the Medical College was in after it had served as a military hospital. Its time as a public school no doubt took its toll. Caldwell Delaney in



*In 1867 Mobile turned out in droves to say farewell to Dr. Nott. An elegant banquet was held at the Battle House Hotel highlighted with toasts, songs and even poems. Apparently disgusted by the destruction of his Medical School and other Reconstruction woes, he left town. This hotel building would burn to the ground in 1905.*

*Courtesy: USA Archives*



*A draped figure symbolic of Grief stands above the Nott monument.*

*Remember Mobile* states “the pupils were allowed to amuse themselves by dropping out of the upper windows the laboratory equipment for which Dr. Nott had made a special trip to Europe.”

Dr. Nott’s pleas to reopen the college were ignored. In 1865 he wrote: *I confess it does not increase my love for the government to see two or three hundred negroes racing through it and tearing everything to pieces — the chemical laboratory is occupied by negro cobblers...*

In 1867 at the height of Reconstruction worries, Dr. Nott gave up in disgust. He announced that he was moving to Baltimore. His choice may have been based on the fact that Maryland had not seceded, emerging relatively unscathed from the war and able to maintain many Southern ties. Thus Dr. Nott was leaving Mobile, the city he had called home for some three decades.

As his friends surrounded him at his farewell party at the Battle House he told them,

*More than thirty years ago I cast my lot with the people of Mobile. Whatever success I have had in my profession and whatever reputation beyond it I have attained is due to their generous kindness.*

*Like poor Rip Van Winkle waking from his long sleep I am in search of a home and a country without the most distant hope of finding what I seek. I cannot forget the sad lesson of history that no conquered country ever regained liberty and equality from its*

*conquerors.*

*My children were born here, they are buried here and the spot is already marked beside them where the remains of their mother and father are to lie.*

## Baltimore and Beyond

Dr. Nott did not find Baltimore quite the haven he had expected. Labor strife and violence erupted and the National Guard had to be called out. While they were in Baltimore the Medical College of Alabama was reopened under the leadership of Dr. William H. Anderson who had been a friend and neighbor of the Notts on St. Francis Street.

However, rather than return to Mobile, the Notts moved to New York. Besides the unrest, Nott had reportedly found Baltimore intellectually dull. Dr. Nott must certainly have been impressed with the explosive growth in Manhattan. He established a practice on West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street while their first home was nearby on West 22<sup>nd</sup>. Despite being in his 60’s his practice eventually flourished especially among a growing population of displaced Southerners.

Nott was welcomed in New York medical circles and was active in the New York Obstetrical Society, ultimately serving as its president. The harsh winters however began to take their toll on the doctor’s health and he later developed tuberculosis. In November of 1872 the couple left for Aiken, S. C. where his condition worsened.

The Notts left Aiken and headed south to Mobile. They moved in with Harleston and Mary Broun. Mrs. Broun was Mrs. Nott’s sister and they lived on St. Francis Street opposite the St. Francis Street Methodist Church.

Dr. Josiah Clark Nott died on March 31, 1873, his 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. Hundreds filed past his casket in the Brouns’ home. On the occasion of his funeral Mobile shut down. Crowds lined the street as his hearse, accompanied by a brass band, uniformed militia units, and carriages filled with dignitaries headed to Magnolia Cemetery. He was buried between the two sons he had lost to war, and his four children lost to yellow fever.

Mrs. Nott returned to New York with her sister. The two spent their days between hotels in the city and up at Saratoga. Sarah Nott died in 1883 and was buried at Magnolia Cemetery beside her husband.

## Dr. Nott’s Legacy

There are no descendants of Josiah Nott. His only surviving child and namesake died a bachelor in 1891 and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery.

Dr. Nott has had his detractors in recent years, but his legacy to Mobile and Alabama’s medical history can never be denied. Nott was a brilliant physician and was beloved by his patients. He founded the Mobile Medical Society in 1841, the first in the state. He was the first physician to argue that mosquitoes were involved in the spread of yellow fever and his founding of the Medical College of Alabama provided this state with physicians who made a great difference in their communities.

Please, we don't want to lose a Friend. Have you sent in your renewal? Thanks for remembering us.

Remember, Gift Membership to the Friends are always appreciated.

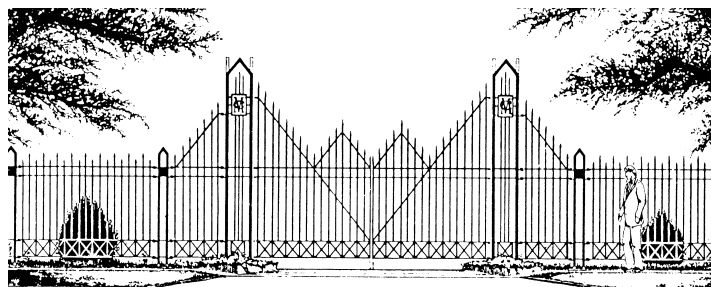
Q: When is the next walking Tour of the cemetery?

A: Saturday, April 18th 2009 at 10:00 AM. It's free for our members and lets you learn about some of the colorful characters who once called Mobile home.

Call us at (251) 432-8672 for further information.

Q: When is the Fence Dedication this year?

A: Sunday, May 3, 2009 at 2:00 PM. Please join us!



Looking for a Gift

If you know someone interested in Mobile's history, why not give them a gift of a membership in the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery? Their membership will help preserve this historic site and provide them with a year's subscription to the Messenger with its historical insights.

Lest We Forget

The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery is the sole beneficiary from the sale of Harry Myers' book Lest We Forget. All proceeds go into the Perpetual Care Trust Fund, due to the generosity of his sons who made it possible for the book to be published.

Order Form for Lest We Forget by Harry E. Myers

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■ Books are \$25 when picked up at Magnolia Cemetery or \$29 when mailed.

■ Make checks payable to Friends of Magnolia Cemetery.

■ Mail your order to Friends of Magnolia Cemetery, P.O. Box 6383, Mobile, AL 36660. The Friends' office is located at 1202 Virginia Street. If you need additional information call (251) 432-8672.

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- Checkboxes for membership contribution (\$35), additional contributions to Friends of Magnolia Cemetery and Perpetual Care Trust Fund, and renewal/new member status.

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## Superintendent's Report

No calendar is needed to know that Spring is officially here. Just take a look at Magnolia Cemetery in bloom!

**Camellias** started the show with some 20 blooming in mid-winter. Next up came the **Carolina Jessamine**. Many erroneously call this "yellow jasmine." These profuse bloomers get prettier every year.

The next harbingers of Spring are the **Silver Bells and Taiwan Cherry trees**. There are nearly 100 of these in the cemetery which have only been planted within the last couple of years, so they will only get prettier with time.

Over 500 naturalizing **daffodils** within 23 flowerbeds are scattered around the cemetery. These are joined by **Japanese magnolia trees** with their stunning lotus-like blossoms. We have just planted an additional 48 of these with their fragrant blooms.

**Crinum lilies** are up and putting on a show with white, and variegated blooms including one known as "milk and wine" for its white and red combination. The Ann Street fence is lined with **Pride of Mobile azaleas** which are currently in full bloom, despite a full pruning last April.

Some 70 **Bradford pear trees** are bursting with white blossoms as if a blanket of snow had just fallen. They are a sure sign of Spring's arrival.

There are more blooms to enjoy in the coming weeks. **Louisiana irises, Daylilies, "Knockout" roses, and crape myrtles** will bring us right into the summertime. Sweet smelling **Confederate Jasmine, and spidery Gloriosa lilies** will be visible from Ann Street.

To screen an unsightly metal barn outside of Square 31, we planted 23 **Loropetalum** and 15 **Cleyera**. With time these shrubs will create a beautiful hedge.

Plans for next year's planting projects are underway. I will keep you posted on our continued progress.

– Mark Halseth

## President's Message

Spring at Magnolia Cemetery has brought out the azaleas, yellow jasmine and other springtime flowers in profusion. In is an excellent time to pay it a visit and see the changes which have taken place.

Our annual walking tour is scheduled for **Saturday, April 18 at 10:00 AM**. Join us for "**Stories Among the Stones**" as we walk the cemetery and learn about some of our famous and infamous Mobilians as well as what all those funerary symbols meant to our ancestors. We will meet on the Virginia Street side of the Cemetery, near the Friends Office at 10:00 and will be finished by 11:30.

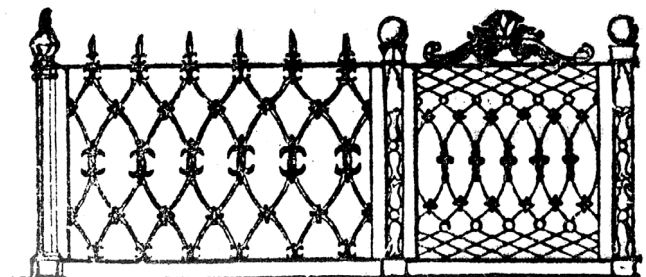
Please give our office a call at (251) 432-8672 if you plan to attend.

Planting is underway near the historic **George Street Gate** to screen an unsightly metal barn on an adjoining piece of property. Mark Halseth and the Horticultural Committee have been hard at work on this project.

The newest fence sections are in place on Virginia Street completing the second to the last gap along this well-traveled thoroughfare. Your donation would be welcomed for another section to go towards its completion.

And finally, please join us at our annual **Fence Dedication Program on Sunday, May 3, 2009 at 2:00 P.M.** All members are invited as we recognize this year's donors and those they are honoring with their donations. Refreshments will follow.

– Tom McGehee



**THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY, INC.**

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