

Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY
NEWSLETTER

www.magnoliacemetery.com

"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Summer 2021

Why?

On a drizzly October morning in 1908, the sidewalks of Government Street were lined with hundreds of mourners. Women wept "without restraint" according to a newspaper account as a funeral cortege made its way west to Ann Street. There were 38 carriages as well as three wagons overflowing with floral tributes headed to Magnolia Cemetery that day. The only sound was from a slow drumbeat delivered by a veteran drummer of the Civil War.

The day before thousands had lined up to pay their condolences at the family home at 1118 Government Street. On the front door hung a wreath of palm leaves from which draped a dark purple ribbon. As they waited, floral delivery wagons brought a growing mountain of floral wreaths and baskets overflowing with blooms emitting a "sad perfume." The senders were described as being organizations to which the deceased had belonged as well as city and county departments, state officers and friends from around the city and state. A silver tray held a stack of telegrams from around the south. Each offered condolences to the family of "Mobile's favorite son," known for his "radiant smile" now dead at just 35.

Upstairs the "broken hearted widow" sat silently beside the deceased whom a reporter described as "peaceful in death." Relatives were greeted below by Mobilians from all walks of life many of whose "expressions of sorrow and sympathy were cut short by choking sobs."

The next day a brief service was conducted in the parlor by the minister of the Government Street Presbyterian Church. After it concluded, the casket was carried to the curb by eight pallbearers. Standing nearby, members of the Mobile Rifle Company presented arms. In addition to the active pallbearers there were 30 honorary pallbearers including nine judges and the mayor of Mobile. According to the newspaper, this was the largest funeral in

recent history in Mobile. The downtown business district was practically deserted. The Athelstan Club, of which the deceased was vice president, had its doors shut and "within an atmosphere of grief prevailed."

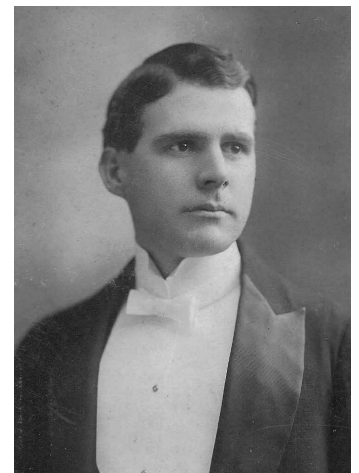
Just who was this "favorite son" and what happened to him?

A Stockton Native

Edward "Ned" Murphy Robinson had been born in Stockton, Ala. in 1873, the son of George and Ann McMillan Robinson. In the 1880 census George Robinson's occupation was given as "farmer." Seven years later he moved to Mobile where city directories list his occupation as "lumberman" in 1889 and two years later as "Vice President Mobile Coal Co." His final listing in 1897 stated he was "Vice President of the Mobile Coal Co. and Improved Wood Pavement Co."

In all of the directories, including those after George's 1898 death, the family home stood at 970 Government Street (later renumbered as 1110). The house stood several doors west of Hallett Street and was demolished decades ago.

Ned Robinson was described as "Mobile's Favorite Son." He was the youngest president of the Mobile Bar Association, vice president of the Athelstan Club, Captain of the Mobile Rifle Company, president of the University of Alabama Alumni Association, served in the state legislature and would be a suicide by the age of 35.



Ned attended the University of Alabama where he was junior orator, senior commencement orator, captain of the cadet corps and earned his bachelor of arts in 1890, at the age of 17. He received his law degree from the university in 1891 and took further courses at the University of Virginia. He returned to Mobile in 1893 and began his law practice.

Just one year after his return, he was elected to the state legislature where he received a reputation as an outstanding orator. Adjectives used in describing his speeches during debates included “brilliant, logical and convincing.”

He served during the Spanish-American War, earning the rank of captain. Within a brief time, he was promoted to major, commanding a battalion from Mobile.

Upon his return to Mobile and his law practice, he was named a trustee for the State Normal School at Troy, Ala. (now Troy University) as well as for Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. In 1901 he was named president of the University of Alabama Alumni Association at the age of 28. Six years later he was elected to be the youngest president of the Mobile Bar Association.

The Barkers

In November of 1903 Ned married 30-year-old Olive Louise Barker at an evening ceremony in St. Francis Street Methodist Church. Olive’s father was Prelate D. Barker, a Connecticut native who had gone to New York at the age of 17 and clerked in a law office before working in various occupations in Illinois and Wisconsin. In 1857 he headed south and entered the mercantile business in Claiborne, Ala. He joined the Confederate army and at war’s end found himself in Selma where he married

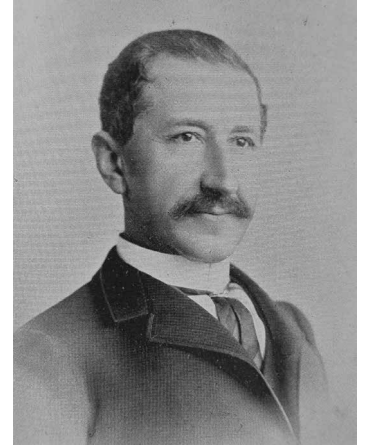
Joanna Ferguson in 1865. His father-in-law, Hugh Ferguson, was one of that county’s most prosperous merchants and landowners at the time.



Olive Barker Robinson the “broken hearted widow” never remarried and outlived her husband by 52 years.

Barker had several occupations after his marriage. The 1870 census placed him in Selma and stated he was the treasurer of the Selma and Meridian Railroad. In 1871 President Grant appointed him as the regional Collector of Internal Revenue, a position he held for six years. Just how popular a Republican appointed tax collector was in Reconstruction Alabama is anyone’s guess.

In the late 1870’s he was back in New York City working as secretary of the Empire Refining Company processing cotton seed oil and petroleum. In 1883 he was appointed tax collector in Alabama’s second district by Republican President Chester Arthur and was living in Mobile by 1885. City directories list him as being in the cotton storage and compressing business after that. The 1893 city directory states he was president of the Battle House which was also his residence.



Prelate D. Barker, Olive’s father. Confederate veteran and Republican tax collector. He wrote his will expecting problems among his heirs.

Barker’s prominence as a Republican served him well and he was a delegate to at least seven Republican National Conventions over the years. After having been appointed to two lucrative positions by Republican presidents, a third, Benjamin Harrison appointed him to postmaster for Mobile – a position he would hold for many years.

By the early 1900’s, the city directories indicate that Prelate and Joanna Barker were residing at the new Bienville Hotel and were apparently there at the time their daughter married Robinson. The newlyweds moved in with his mother and brother at 1110 Government Street.

A Government Street Address

On November 1, 1905, records show that Barker loaned his daughter the sum of \$10,000 (well over \$300,000 in today’s dollars) to purchase 1118 Government Street. This Queen Anne home had been built a decade earlier by Judge Saffold Berney and it was just three doors west of Olive’s mother-in-law.



The former Robinson home at 1118 Government Street had been built in 1895 by Judge Saffold Berney. He was one of nine judges to serve as a pallbearer for Ned Robinson.

In 1906 the couple's only child was born: Joanna Elizabeth Robinson. Named for Olive's mother and sister, the child was known as Bessie, as was her aunt. The couple had a beautiful home, at least one full-time servant and a healthy baby. Ned's career and reputation were stellar.



Bessie Robinson as a 1922 graduate of Mobile County High School. Five years later that school moved into new quarters designed in part by architect George B. Rogers and named for Samuel S. Murphy. Both of those men had served as pallbearers at her father's funeral in 1908.

The Masson Case

The next two years saw Ned's law practice continue to grow. In 1907 he was hired by James Henry Masson, Jr. to contest his late father's will which disinherited him. For six days that December, the courtroom was packed as Ned Robinson denounced Masson, Sr. a long time president of Mobile's First National Bank, as insane, physically and mentally abusive to his wife and only child and a chronic womanizer among "lewd women." As Ned addressed the audience the Register reported that he was met with "waves of commendatory applause –

clapping of hands and stamping of feet" as he swayed the crowd. When he read a letter aloud from the former Mrs. Masson a reporter wrote that "Mr. Robinson moved jurors and spectators to tears—nearly every woman in the house was industriously using their handkerchiefs."

The jury was out less than an hour. The will was broken. So, 1908 certainly had begun on a high note. The year would end however, far differently.

The Mystery

October 25th was a Sunday and Ned had visited the Athelstan Club, leaving around 2:00 PM. He stopped by the Webb house at 1108 Government Street, one door west of his mother's home. James H. Webb was an attorney and good friend of Ned's and he invited him to attend a lecture down at the YMCA that evening before he proceeded home. Webb said he seemed to be in a great mood and planned on going with him. Ultimately Webb would be planning his friend's funeral instead.

Neighbors recalled seeing Ned and Olive playing with Bessie on the lawn that afternoon. They would have appeared to be the ideal family. The cook reported that as he entered the house he smiled and said he hoped she had something good planned for supper as he was famished. Ned joined his wife at the dinner table and after finishing a bowl of soup he left the table as the cook brought in the meat course. A shot, or some say two, shattered the silence. Olive Robinson rushed into the bedroom and saw her husband on the floor dying from a fatal head wound. There was no note and no reason has ever been found for this handsome, popular and brilliant young man to take his life.

The story made headlines the next day in newspapers from Alabama to the New York Times. The lengthy biographical sketch of Robinson and numerous interviews with citizens ranging from judges to the city's most prominent Rabbi to men on the street, all left the reader with the same question: Why?

After the Funeral

Olive lived on at the Government Street home and was joined by her parents. Her mother died two years later, and in 1914 P. D. Barker remarried and lived another 14 years. The bride, Grace Petit was 40 while the groom was 78. Just how the household got along may be revealed in

Barker's will. He specified that "any person who directly or indirectly resists the probate or contests the validity of this will shall be barred and divested of all interest from my estate." He left the estate to be equally divided between his wife and three daughters.

In 1922, Bessie Robinson graduated from Mobile County High School. Her yearbook had this cryptic quote beneath her name: "Men may come and men may go, But I go on forever." Bessie never married and lived out her life in Washington D.C. where her profession was given as a governmental clerk.

After Barker's death in 1928, his widow moved in with her father and worked as a postal clerk. Perhaps this position was given out of respect for her late husband's long association with the post office.

Barker had been survived by three daughters. Frances Jane Wales was the oldest and she lived in New York City. Joanna Elizabeth "Bessie" Pettus was two years younger and she had moved into the Barker house after her husband's death in 1915.

The two younger sisters eventually moved to Washington and lived with young Bessie until their deaths. Will's tell a lot about family dynamics. Aunt Bessie's will left her sister Frances the sum of \$1 while leaving everything else to Olive who died at the age of 87 in 1960.

One by one the three women joined Ned in the Barker lot. At some time in the past, long before the Friends' existence, someone completely covered the lot in a barren layer of concrete to keep it from disappearing under the weeds which were engulfing the cemetery.

The reason for Ned Robinson's unlikely suicide has been buried there with him beneath that cement for nearly 113 years.

—Tom McGehee



*Olive and Ned share this marker for eternity.
Their daughter's grave is nearby.*



The P. D. Barker lot in Magnolia Cemetery. It took three wagons to carry all of the floral tributes here for Ned Robinson on a rainy day in 1908.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Things have been very busy at Magnolia Cemetery since your receipt of the last Magnolia Messenger.

For starters, the office of the Friends has temporarily relocated from the Cemetery's historic gatehouse off of Virginia Street to the old gardener's shed in the northernmost reaches of the grounds. The Veteran's Affairs Department, the governmental overseeing Federal burial grounds, will be commencing a multi-month restoration of the handsome Second Empire building.

Around the Cemetery, multiple new fence sections have been dedicated.

At the beginning of the summer, members of the board, including Restoration Committee chair Pratt Paterson, met with representatives of the Office of Archaeological Research (OAR), an office of the University of Alabama. OAR has conducted major cemetery conservation assessments and work in many burial grounds across the state, among them recent work at the "New Cemetery" in Cahawba. The Friends and Magnolia's staff look forward to engaging with the OAR team in restoration on a number of important burial markers and plots.

The Horticulture and Arboretum has an energetic new chair in Sallye Irvine. Here's to Magnolia having some more magnolias, among other plantings, in the near future!

The City of Mobile's Parks Department sent staff to inspect and work on Magnolia Cemetery's many roadbeds. Using earth and surfacing provided by the Friends, the Parks Department has made certain roads navigable that have long been nearly inaccessible and corrected long-term drainage issues.

Again, much has been a foot at Magnolia Cemetery. The recent work, not to mention almost four decades of efforts preceding it, would not be possible without the support from members such as yourself. Please renew your membership, and encourage family and friends to do so likewise. A membership form may be found in this newsletter.

*Sincerely and Respectfully,
Cartledge W. Blackwell, III – "Cart"
President*




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~ Summer 2021 ~

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