

# Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY  
NEWSLETTER

www.magnoliacemetery.com

"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Fall 2016

## Mobile's Asylum for Orphans



*The Protestant Orphans Asylum in a late 19th century view. In 1845 Mobilians gathered beneath the large oak tree visible to the right, for the laying of the cornerstone.*

Within Magnolia Cemetery are more than 300 lots once owned by a wide variety of benevolent orders, labor unions, fire departments, churches and fraternal organizations. Lives in 19th century Mobile were often cut short by a variety of diseases and members of these groups could be assured a proper burial when their financial circumstances might not have allowed it.

Lost among these lots, many of which are centered with grand monuments portraying the occupation of their residents, is a far more modest space. There is no marker and the modest tombstones mark only a fraction of those who rest here. The step leading up to this space is marked simply "P.O. Asylum."

The lot belonged to the Protestant Orphan's Asylum and the earliest burial was in May of 1857: Nathaniel Ervin, age 7. The most recent: April of 1920, George Moore, age 3. Research has unearthed a few death records and the stated causes are chilling. John Duffey died at 15 months, cause: convulsions. Franklin Saultier died at age 11, cause marasmus (severe malnutrition). Three year old Sophia Marrow died from enteritis, a viral bacterial infection usually associated with bad drinking water.

A 1907 obituary from the Mobile Register offers this account of an orphan's funeral:

*The funeral of Dora Hattaway, aged twelve years when death occurred at the Protestant Orphan's Asylum on Dauphin Street, took place from the asylum at 10 o'clock yesterday with services attended by the ladies in charge of the orphanage and the little orphans in a body. The internment was in the orphan's plot in Magnolia Cemetery where the little grave was covered with fresh flowers. Four of the little boys from the asylum served as pall bearers.*

### The Asylum

The yellow fever epidemic which ravaged Mobile in 1839 showed no distinction between rich or poor. Mobile's wealthiest citizen, Judge Henry Hitchcock was a victim along with hundreds of other men, women and children from all walks of life. As a result of that tragedy with one or both parents dying, the need for an orphanage became clear.

With its French and Spanish history, Mobile was a very Catholic city in the early 19th century. A Catholic Orphan's Asylum had been established on Conti Street in 1838, opposite the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception which was under construction.

During the 1830's Mobile's population exploded with



*The lot for the Protestant Orphans' Asylum within Magnolia Cemetery.*

transplants from New York and New England as well as other parts of the South. These were Americans with deep Protestant roots and during that decade some of Mobile's landmark churches were constructed including Government Street Presbyterian completed in 1837 and Christ Episcopal Church three years later.

A group of women representing Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist and Baptist denominations met following the 1839 epidemic to organize the Protestant Orphans Asylum Society. Minutes reflect that there had previously been an "Orphan's Society" attempting to care for "children as had lost either parent or both."

The early minutes of the society indicate that the orphans were housed in a building, but just where it was located seems to be a mystery. An 1843 entry notes a \$100 expense for "Fence to be erected. Premises were very exposed and looked so desolate." Other early minutes reflect the arrival of "an infant by the name of Emma whose mother is on prison on theft," while "a five year old boy, George Close died of dysentery." By 1824, 21 children were being cared for by members of the society.

### Property is Obtained

During the fall of 1844 it was determined that an appropriate building was necessary for the asylum and in January of 1845 a group met at Government Street Presbyterian Church "to decide upon some step to building or purchasing a house for the asylum." A committee was appointed and a permanent location for the asylum was chosen: a two acre parcel on Dauphin Street just west of Broad Street, later numbered as 911.

In March of 1845 the committee selected the proposal of architect Henry Moffat, a Philadelphia native. In a cruel twist of fate, Mr. Moffat contracted yellow fever and died before he ever saw the building completed. Just where Mr. Moffat was buried

is undetermined and no further information about his prior work has been uncovered.

On a steamy July 4, 1845 a large crowd gathered on Dauphin Street, taking advantage of the shade of a large live oak tree. Children from local Sunday schools were invited to participate and observe a ceremony to lay the building's cornerstone. Local merchant George Cleveland read off the contents of a copper box which a brick mason was entombing in a corner of the structure.

As reported in the Register three days later, "*this edifice is to be entirely of brick, put up in the best manner; fifty feet square divided by a hall of ten feet in width. It is located nearly in the center of a beautiful lot of two acres, situated about one mile from Royal Street on Dauphin Way. The lot was a present from a few liberal gentlemen to the institution – its cost \$1,400.*"

After the singing of "a suitable hymn," attorney Daniel Chandler whose wife, Sarah had been involved on the project from the start, *delivered an exceedingly beautiful address, abounding with eloquence, good sense and feeling.* That illustrious speaker's granddaughter, Florence, would have the dubious distinction of being the first American woman to be sentenced to the British gallows for murdering her husband, but that's another story.

### The Building is Completed

Minutes of the society indicated that "we find it necessary to make all possible haste in erecting the new building...the sickly season is now approaching." Apparently the builders complied as the structure was ready for occupancy on March 31, 1846 a year after the committee had first been appointed to oversee its construction.

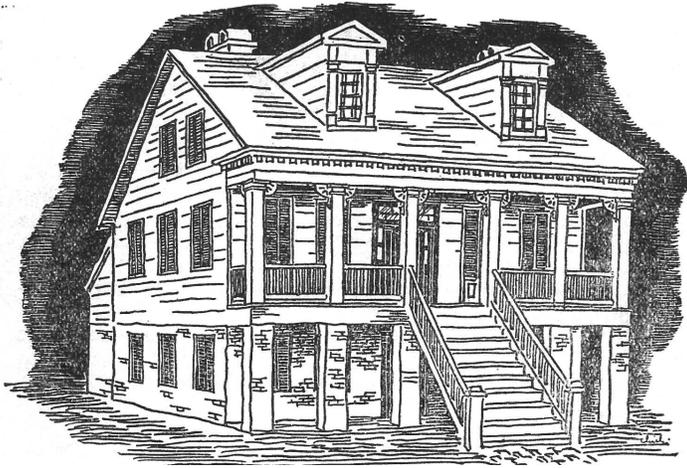
The handsome building was designed to house up to 40 boys and girls. Interestingly in 1847 the Catholic orphanages were separated by sex when a decree was sent down that the Sisters of Charity could no longer work in a facility housing boys.

At the Protestant Orphans Asylum boys were housed until the age of 12 when they were expected to enter the workforce as an apprentice in a trade. Girls could remain until the age of 15, although some stayed until 18.

The children attended public schools, and according to an 1846 decision they were taken to a different church each month. A vegetable garden was planted on the property and a milk cow was always present. Board minutes reflect that "after considerable discussion it was agreed to get rid of the old cow and purchase a new one on as favorable terms as possible."

Minutes also reflect that it was resolved "to purchase for the boys two suits of clothes and a seamstress employed to make them," while "a poor woman should be employed" to make the girls' clothes.

Early minutes also reveal the day to day operations of the orphanage. In 1848 the minutes reflect that "*A man named James Savel presented himself requesting to take two daughters of Mrs. Lee (whom he married) to his own home. The ladies did not like his appearance and thought it best not to let him have them and sent for the mother of the girls to hear her wishes. The girls are unwilling to leave the asylum.*"



*An image of the Israel Jones home at 912 Conti Street which once adjoined the asylum property. For many years Mr. Jones covered the cost of the orphan's Christmas dinner, and made it a memorable annual event.*

### A Christmas Tradition

For decades a neighbor of the asylum saw to it that the orphans enjoyed a Christmas feast. Israel Jones, the father of eight, had noticed the children peeking through the fence as his family entertained. His decision to make sure that the orphans always had a memorable Christmas was especially moving in that Jones was the longtime president of the city's oldest Jewish congregation.

At Jones' death in 1876 the *Register* ran lengthy editorials extolling his many contributions to Mobile – including establishing the city's first street railway, working as a volunteer fireman, serving as mayor and establishing the Mobile Musical Association. His annual gift to his young Protestant neighbors was also described in detail.

### Paying the Bills

From the very beginning, the Protestant Orphans Asylum depended on the generosity of Mobilians. In newspapers of the day references abound to activities taking place to assist the asylum. A "strawberry party" raised \$980 for needed furniture. A concert at Government Street Presbyterian raised \$635.

For 1847 the county commissioners provided \$250, the Strikers Society \$50 and \$12 from "Ladies' Subscriptions."

On the eve of the Civil War a \$10,000 bequest from James Battle was received. Mr. Battle had been the developer behind the Battle House Hotel as well as the Point Clear Hotel, later renamed the Grand. Records indicate the money was used to enlarge the building and make alterations to the dining room and "the fitting up of a bathroom." With the advent of war the need for the asylum grew. As casualties mounted the facility housed more than double the intended number.

A soon established tradition was an annual "Orphans Fair" to benefit the orphanage. Items were collected for a white elephant sale, ladies baked cakes or sewed or stitched items for sale. A May, 1902 newspaper account described that year's event as including "flower stands, ice cream stands, coffee booths, a green grocer's stand while a bandstand with a good brass band furnished the latest musical selections... At each stand were ten or twelve pretty girls and handsome women."

### From Caring for the Young to an Old Age Home

The orphanage was enlarged and remodeled in 1924 and in 1946 the facility was renamed the Protestant Children's Home. Further additions arrived in 1950 and 1964 but times were changing and orphanages were falling from favor by the end of the 1960's. Mobile's Protestant Children's Home was vacant by 1975.

The property housed a Catholic school for a few years before being converted into a rehabilitation center in 1983. It began nearly a 20 year run in 1987 as a series of nursing homes before a 2007 conversion into a dormitory for foreign born employees of the Battle House Hotel.

Abandoned once again the building stood vacant, vandalized and fire damaged until purchased by the Historical Restoration Society, a group of concerned individuals who have contributed substantial sums to rescue this important structure from a very uncertain future. Renamed as Cotton Hall, fund raising continues with future plans calling for the restored and refurbished facility to be used for a variety of civic events.

In repairing the collapsing north east corner of the brick structure, 21st century masons uncovered the copper box sealed near the cornerstone by their 19th century predecessors. The contents of that box are being conserved and will be maintained as an important link to that sultry July day in 1845 when Mobile's most prominent citizens gathered to celebrate the start of this historic building. The oak tree those participants sat beneath remains as well.

~ Tom McGehee



*The former orphanage is undergoing an extensive renovation and has been renamed "Cotton Hall."*

## IT'S TOUR TIME!

Take advantage of Mobile's fall weather and plan to join us on a walking tour of historic Magnolia Cemetery.

Tige Marston, Municipal Cemeteries Manager, will once again offer three different and memorable tours this November:

- Saturday, November 5 at 10:00AM: *Victorian Burial Customs and Traditions.*
- Saturday, November 12 at 10:00AM: *Historic People and Events*
- Saturday, November 19 at 10:00AM: *Victorian Funerary Art and Symbolism*

All three tours are free and will be finished by Noon. Space is limited so we ask you reserve a spot by calling us at (251) 208-7307 or (251) 432-8672 as soon as possible. Signs will direct visitors from the designated parking area to the starting point of each tour.

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Fall 2016

<i>In Memory of..</i>	<i>Given By..</i>
John Ladd	Harrison F. Giddens
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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*Fall weather is finally here, so let's get outside and enjoy it. Please note the walking tours mentioned in this newsletter which will be conducted by Tige Marston on three Saturdays during November. Each covers a different subject and participants will learn some interesting Mobile history as well as the fascinating story of symbolism and the culture of death in the 19th Century.*

*If you haven't visited the cemetery lately you may have missed the handsome addition of the replicated fence being installed at Hebrew Rest. According to a history of The Gates of Heaven (Spring Hill Avenue Temple), their lot in the "New Burying Ground" was expanded in 1848 and "about two years later the congregation erected an iron fence, greatly enhancing its appearance." That fence vanished many years ago and now thanks to generous funding from the Ben May Foundation and the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery, that fence is on its way back.*

*During Veteran's Day weekend a visit to Magnolia Cemetery will reveal nearly a hundred veterans' flags fluttering in the November breeze. Don't miss this beautiful scene.*

*Fall is also the time to renew your annual membership in the Friends. Current members should have received a renewal envelope and I hope you have not forgotten to return it to us. We simply could not operate this cemetery or this organization without the support of our Friends!*

*And please consider giving a gift membership. The recipient need not have loved ones here, but if they have an interest in Mobile history I think they will enjoy receiving our three newsletters a year.*

Tom McGehee  
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.
- I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Perpetual Care Trust Fund.
- Renewal     I am a new member.

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Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Square \_\_\_\_\_ Lot No. \_\_\_\_\_

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

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In Memory of Sophia Hunter Ethier by her husband Raymond Ethier

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