

MAGNOLIA MESSENGER



The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery

"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Summer 2011

From Paris to Poverty

In 1874, Jennie Jerome, daughter of a New York financier, married Lord Randolph Churchill. Most consider her marriage to have been the first instance of a wealthy American marrying a European title. Her conquest may well have precipitated an avalanche, for by 1910 some 500 other American women had followed her lead.

In actuality, a Mobilian had married a titled Frenchman a decade earlier, and whether it was true love or her mother's determination is still up for speculation. Her name has nearly been forgotten today, but was once a household word.

Her Grave

Near the center of Magnolia Cemetery is the lot of Judge Henry Hitchcock (1792-1839) who financed the construction of Government Street Presbyterian Church and Barton Academy before dying from yellow fever. Within the handsome iron fence is a small monument to Emily James Blount de Riviere who died in 1917. Emily's aunt Rebecca James had married Isaac Erwin, whose sister was Ann Erwin Hitchcock, Henry's wife.

Mrs. Hitchcock left Mobile for her native Tennessee after becoming a widow and was buried there. She left behind the graves of her husband and two young daughters, and apparently never returned.

Ann Hitchcock may not be buried here, but her once famous niece, Emily James Blount deRiviere, is. Her modest granite marker is all that remains of a Mobilian who was once worthy of coverage in the world's major newspapers. She had come a long way from Clarke County, Ala.



Ca. 1870

Ca. 1900

Baroness de Riviere

Courtesy (USA) McCall Library

The Blounts

Frederick Spaight Blount was a North Carolina attorney who found his way to Gosport in eastern Clarke County in the late 1830's. In 1840 he built a plantation home known as "Woodlands." The house was a handsome one with Doric columns of cypress, ornate plaster ceilings and mantels painted to resemble Italian marble. The wide entrance hall had a musicians' gallery and was the setting for popular dances.

He and his wife, the former Emily James, are listed there in the 1850 Federal census where they gave their ages as 41 and 33 and as having three children, Mary, 13, Burwell, 10 and Emily, 9. As the importance of nearby Clairborne diminished it is likely that Blount's law practice began to suffer.

The family left Gosport within a decade and moved to Mobile. The 1852 city directory lists Blount practicing as an attorney with an office on St. Michael Street and a home on the southwest corner of Springhill Avenue and Lafayette Street.

Their home in Mobile had been built by Mrs. Blount's brother-in-law, Isaac Erwin (1807-1843). Erwin and Henry Hitchcock had married the older sisters of Emily Blount. There are no photographs of the house on Springhill Avenue but Erwin Craighead described it as "a handsome residence of the old style, of wood painted white, on a considerable piece of well shaded ground." The house was apparently grand enough for the Erwins to have hosted Henry Clay for dinner during his visit to Mobile in February of 1843.

The Blounts enjoyed Mobile's social life and continued to entertain as they had up at "Woodlands." In 1858 they hosted a party for a visiting Frenchman, having no idea what a role this man would play in all their lives.

Captain de Riviere

Henri Arnous de Riviere arrived in Mobile with a flourish in 1858. Described as a tall "military-looking man, with strong well-bronzed face and imposing mustache" he reportedly turned heads – and tongues – wherever he went.

Henri had a mysterious background, but he came from New York equipped with a letter of introduction to Mobile's leading hostess, Madame Octavia Walton LeVert. His French was perfect, he rode a horse magnificently and his military bearing certainly matched his claim of having served as a captain in the French army since 1844. No mention of course was made that he had been convicted in absentia by a French court for having embezzled a woman's fortune and forced her into bankruptcy.

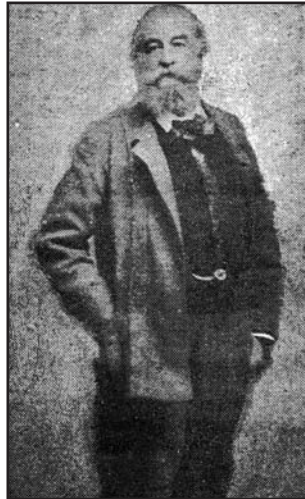
Madame LeVert invited him frequently to her home on Government Street and soon doors were opening to him all over town, including the Blounts'. The ladies in Mobile couldn't get enough of the handsome Frenchman. Although he claimed never to have used the title it was rumored that he was a baron.

He was asked to lecture of his experiences in the Crimean War and what the newspaper termed his "exploits of daring and dashing heroism." The women crowded the room for a view of the speaker.

The gentlemen of Mobile were not as enamored of the Frenchman as the ladies. Whether jealous, skeptical, or a bit of both, the talk in clubs and watering holes around town was often of this new arrival.

The Duel

One man who led this faction was Captain Harry Maury. According to a 1937 newspaper account, Maury had arrived in Mobile in 1849 and took charge of a schooner called The Mobile. He then passed the bar exam and became a noted jurist in town before being named police chief in 1855. He was also known for his wit and his popularity among the opposite sex.



The Baron de Riviere
from a photograph
appearing in
"From Mobile's Past"
by Erwin S. Craighead.

Maury was no fan of the Frenchman. There are two versions of what happened next, but it took place in a Royal Street coffeehouse. Some have said that Maury overheard de Riviere make an insulting comment about Octavia LeVert. The more popular version is that Maury called de Riviere "Count no count, barren of intellect!" The Frenchman was not amused as the crowd roared with laughter.

Whichever the case, a duel was called for on a Sunday night in April. That afternoon de Riviere called on Mrs. Blount and told her about the impending duel. He confided in her about his family background, his baronetcy and had a request: Should he not make it, he wanted to be buried under the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. It seems curious that he would ask a mere acquaintance much less an Episcopalian to do him such a favor.

As the daylight dimmed the two men and their seconds traveled west just across the state line into a remote area in Mississippi. The weapons of choice were Colt revolvers at twelve paces.

As a crowd of men watched, Maury shot the baron in the chest. de Riviere fell to the ground but was able to fire his pistol, just missing the American. Maury's second realized that the Frenchman had been knocked to the ground from the bullet's impact but miraculously not been injured. Although he suspected him of wearing armor it was actually a \$20 gold piece in his vest pocket that had deflected the bullet. Maury then aimed for his head causing a bloody, but not fatal, facial wound.

Henri de Riviere was loaded up into a carriage and taken back to Mobile. Some versions say that Frederick Blount stopped the group as it passed his gate and invited the injured man inside. Others say the invitation was extended by his wife. In any event, de Riviere took up residence with the Blounts and was nursed by Mrs. Blount and her daughter.

As the baron recuperated his attention fell not on Mrs. Emily Blount, but on her teenaged daughter, Miss Emily. In the early spring of 1858 Henri de Riviere was nearing 30, and she was not yet 17. Mrs. Blount made no attempt to stop his interests. Like many a 19th century mother that came after her she had apparently decided that her daughter would marry a European title.

One afternoon in June, a startled Frederick Blount returned home from business in Montgomery, to find it empty of the baron, his daughter and his wife. The trio had boarded a steamer for New Orleans and by the time Blount tracked them down were on another ship bound for Havana.



Woodlands

In 1840 Fredrick Blount built "Woodlands" in Clarke County and lived there for a decade before settling in Mobile. It was here that daughter Emily was born in 1841.

The Chase Begins

The gossips had a field day in Mobile wondering just who the baron had run off with. Was it Mrs. Emily Blount or her daughter? And why hadn't Mr. Blount known about it? Mrs. Blount would later contend it was for propriety that she had accompanied her daughter and the baron.

Once in Cuba, the trio boarded yet another vessel. This one brought them to New York and Mr. Blount followed. Once in Manhattan he did what any attorney would do. He filed suit against de Riviere. Interestingly the suit was filed not to return his underage daughter or his wife. He accused the baron of stealing "certain articles of ladies' wear and apparel, ladies' dresses, garments and one gold ring." Blount explained that he had purchased these items and claimed ownership. He also reported that he suspected de Riviere of already having a wife.

As the trio skipped from one Manhattan hotel to another, with Blount in pursuit, the matter made it into the newspapers, including The New York Times. He finally cornered the baron in a less than fashionable hotel in Hoboken, N.J. and had him arrested. Blount still did not know the whereabouts of his wife and daughter.

de Riviere Responds

A Frenchman in Difficulties – The Arrest of Capt. deRiviere was printed in the July 6, 1858 edition of the Times. The Frenchman countered in interviews that he was not married, and had taken the two ladies out of harm's way from Blount whom he described as the villain.

While boasting that he was "twenty times as rich as

Mr. Blount," he also said of his daughter, "I shall protect her and will marry her as soon as I can." And he bitterly exclaimed, "I have been treated as an adventurer and vagabond by men who would find it embarrassing to tell who their grandfathers were!"

One newspaper account described Emily as being "of medium height, (with) full dark hair and dark blue eyes."

The three Blounts apparently managed some sort of reconciliation and headed for Mobile. On September 5, 1858, the Mobile Register reported their return noting that Henri "has gone to New York to settle in some way his former marriage, then he will come to Mobile to enter with Miss Emily Blount in the holy bonds of matrimony."

In reality, deRiviere staunchly denied ever having been married. The family story is that Henri de Riviere and the Blounts agreed that Emily should complete her education and he returned to France.

Despite the avalanche of newspaper publicity and gossip, the Blounts settled back to life in Mobile by the early fall of 1858. One can only imagine that things were tense for the family as all of Mobile looked on, and whispered.

Two Siblings Lost

Emily's older sister Mary, had earlier married and settled in New Orleans. Just a month after the Blounts returned south she died. Her body was buried in Clarke County. The family was now down to just four: Mr. and Mrs. Blount, Emily and her older brother Burwell, who was listed as working as a "clerk" in the 1860 city directory.

Burwell volunteered for service at the outbreak of war and was killed by a cannon ball during the battle of Wynn's Mill near Yorktown, Virginia. His death was listed on the 20th of April, 1862. His enlistment papers revealed him to be just under six feet tall with "a dark complexion, hazel eyes and dark hair."

A Paris Wedding

Somehow despite the war, a letter came to the Blounts from Henri de Riviere. The former French captain explained that through his brother's death he had now inherited the family fortune, his baronetcy and was now in a position to ask for Emily's hand. In addition, the envelope reportedly contained 50,000 francs to cover travel expenses.

The three Blounts agreed to go to France with apparently all forgiven. Perhaps having lost their other two children they wanted to indulge their surviving child. Maybe they were sick of the war. Or was it the 50,000



Blount Home Site

The Blount home once occupied a large lot on the south west corner of Spring Hill Avenue and Lafayette Street. After its demolition it became home to a bungalow which was later converted to house physicians' offices.

francs and a title for Emily? Whatever the reason, the three risked their lives to board a blockade runner to Havana. From there they took a Spanish steamer to Gibraltar where they were welcomed by de Riviere, his mother and his sister.

The group traveled on to Paris for the wedding. Mrs. Blount's daughter had finally become the French noblewoman she had wanted her to be. Henri's fortune allowed them to live in grand style. They entertained lavishly and Emily was clothed by the house of Worth and glittered in jewels. Henri figured prominently in Paris and was feted for having chartered a ship from South America and returned with a cargo of exotic animals for the city's zoo.

The couple had as many as five houses, including a villa on Capri. The American Civil War and the South's defeat had become just something to occasionally read about in the papers. The France in which the de Rivieres reveled was ruled by Napoleon III and his wife the Empress Eugenie. All of Europe was entranced with the glamour of their court and Eugenie's taste in clothes, furniture and architecture which was increasingly followed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Emily's parents did not return to war-ravaged Alabama, choosing to live in Paris instead. It was there that her mother died in 1868. Her grave marker stands in Clarke County but whether or not the family had her body shipped from France is unknown. In any event she was lucky enough to miss her daughter's story-book marriage unravel.

By 1870, Emily and the baron had three children: Claire, Henri, and the baby, Sabine. Despite the beautiful family and their glamorous lifestyle, Emily noticed a change in her husband.

Distractions and a Certain Blonde

Henri had been speculating in a series of mining operations in South America as well as guano mines. It soon turned out that he was far from alone on his numerous trips overseas to check on his investments. As time would tell, Henri and the French emperor had much in common: both had a weakness for pretty girls. Napoleon III once confided in a friend "Ah yes, the Empress. I was faithful to her during the first six months of our marriage, but I need my little distractions...I always go back to her with pleasure."

Henri had his own "distractions." He had met a wealthy and attractive Parisian named Helen Stille and told her he was single. As the romance blossomed, Henri convinced Stille to sell nearly \$90,000 worth of her property and the two then left for South America in grand style. After a lengthy and very expensive trip, they returned to Paris where the now pregnant Miss Stille discovered she had paid for the trip and that her money was gone...and so was Henri.

To make matters worse she soon learned that her Henri was not only married but had three children. Mlle Stille went to confront him, only to find that he had left for New York. She followed him and had him arrested for embezzlement and the matter was reported in the Mobile papers of October 14, 1869.

Henri apparently escaped prosecution once more. He sold off some of his South American interests and must have settled up with Stille. He returned to France where he and Emily somehow reconciled while living grandly for a few more years.

Troubles Increase

The baron went through his latest fortune with ease and then began absorbing what Emily had inherited from her mother. When she objected to his supporting yet another mistress on her money, arguments erupted and he retaliated by reportedly locking her in the cellar with a snake.

The couple became the center of Paris gossip and Emily had enough. Her father came and took her back to Mobile and their home on Springhill Avenue where it had all started. This may have been in 1876 as in that year Blount applied for a U. S. passport. The application states that he was age 68 and reveals he was married to Anna K. Blount, age 39. Nothing further has been found of this second Mrs. Blount.

Emily does not appear in the Mobile city directories until the 1884 edition. In it she was listed as Baroness Emilie de Riviere, although she herself preferred the title of Madame. There is no listing for her father.

It is not clear who had been occupying the Blount home while the family was living abroad. Her father was listed there in the 1874 city directory but never appears again. An 1876 tax lien for unpaid property taxes was at some point cleared and may have occurred between renters.

Emily arrived in Mobile with her two younger children, Henri and Sabine. Claire, her eldest, stayed behind with her father and later entered the Paris theatre. She was married twice, first to a Russian count and secondly to a wealthy New Yorker.

According to his grave marker in Clarke County, Frederick Blount died in November of 1885. The records at Christ Church state that the funeral was held at the family home on December 1. No obituary could be found in the newspapers around those dates, but that seems typical of the paper during those years.

Emily began seeing some old friends who recalled that while she often spoke of her happy times in Europe, she never mentioned the baron. She attended both Sunday school and services at Christ Church and led a relatively quiet existence. The change after her tumultuous life with Henri was probably a welcome one. And then again, she was also rapidly going broke.

A Singular Life

As the years passed, Emily found herself alone. Henri and Sabine left Mobile once they were of age. According to some sources Henri married and moved to Alaska or "some western state" while Sabine returned to Paris.

Mobile was greatly surprised in the 1890's when the baron suddenly made an appearance. He moved into rooms above the stables behind Emily's house and kept his own hours. She never once commented on the situation to her friends, and they did not ask. The baron disappeared and reappeared several times over the years, finally opting for a retirement home for French soldiers in Paris where he died in 1909.

Madame de Riviere quietly sold off her fine French silver, her jewels and even her beautiful laces to survive. A Mobilian later recalled being in a jewelry shop where he was offered an elaborate fan encrusted with jewels. The shopkeeper merely whispered "the baroness." Soon the art from her walls and the furniture began to go as well. Some remembered her attempting to sell magazine subscriptions to make ends meet.

A routine was eventually established which kept her from starvation. On each day of the week she would take her main meal of the day with a different friend's family. On Mondays it was the Smiths, Tuesdays the

Jones' and so on. Meanwhile the once handsome home slid ever further towards dereliction.

Emily Blount de Riviere died on October 6, 1917 at the age of 76. Her obituary described her as "one of the most distinguished and gifted women of Mobile. She was of a lively and vivacious disposition and cheerful under reverses and always happy in the society of her friends."

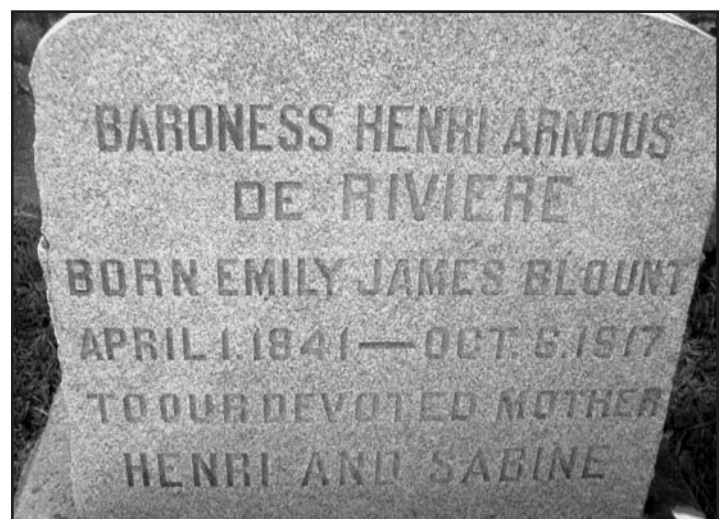
A funeral was held at the home of the Robert W. Hallett family on St. Louis Street. Madame de Riviere's home on Springhill Avenue was obviously in no condition to host such an event. The burial then took place at Magnolia Cemetery, "with a large concourse of friends present."

The old Blount home was demolished with out notice and the Sanborn fire map indicates a vacant lot in its place by the start of the next decade. With the arrival of the new Providence Hospital across the street, this area became increasingly attractive for doctors' offices and one eventually occupied the corner where Emily de Riviere had lived out her days.

In 1940 Sabine de Riviere died and was buried beside her mother. The whereabouts of any other descendants of Mobile's famous baroness remain a mystery.

Tom McGehee

My thanks to the staff at the (USA)-D.L. McCall Library, the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, Jacob Laurence at the Museum of Mobile and David Bagwell, Esq. for their assistance. TM



Baroness Headstone

Emily Blount de Riviere may have preferred the title of "Madame" but her children buried her at Magnolia Cemetery as a baroness.



The Henry Hitchcock Lot at Magnolia Cemetery
with its handsome gate and the late judge's obelisk visible to the left.



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.

Mark Your Calendars For:

Stories Among the Stones
A Walking Tour of Magnolia Cemetery
Saturday, November 12, 2011
10:00 A.M.

Free for Members of the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery

Please Don't forget your Friends!
Renew Your Membership Today

THANKS!

(We regret that as a non-profit agency we cannot afford to send newsletters if your membership has expired.)

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

Name _____

Address _____

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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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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.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Square _____ Lot No. _____

- Please contact me to work on volunteer projects.

President's Message

The summer traditionally begins with Memorial Day and this holiday will be celebrated at Magnolia Cemetery with our "Avenue of Heroes" when 53 full sized American flags will be flown along our main entry drives. If you miss this spectacle it will be repeated on Veteran's Day, Friday, November 11, 2011.

These flags have been donated to the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery by the families of deceased American veterans who received them from the U. S. government. When donated, the flags are placed on poles bearing the deceased veteran's name, and fly twice a year. After they are flown they are carefully stored until the next holiday.

If you know of a veteran's family who has received a flag and they would like to donate it to our Avenue of Heroes display, please call our office. To date we have received flags from eight states and as far away as from California. And please remember that the deceased veteran does not have to be buried here to be so honored.

A \$100 donation to the Friends can also secure a flag to honor whomever you choose.

On another topic, the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery was pleased to be included in this years Historic Homes Tour sponsored by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society each March. This year's tour focused on the city's grand boulevard, Government Street which has historically been home to many prominent families who now rest at Magnolia Cemetery.

On a picture perfect Friday afternoon we had about 40-45 people take the tours which were given by Devereaux Bemis and John Sledge of the city's Historic Development Commission and our own "Tige" Marston who manages the city's cemetery office. The Historic Mobile Preservation Society was pleased with the success of the event and we will look into doing it again next year, although we may opt for a Saturday morning tour rather than Friday.

On Saturday, November 12, at 10:00 AM we will have a walking tour of Magnolia Cemetery, so mark your calendars for "Stories Among the Stones." Reservations are requested. Hope to see you there!

And finally, owners of lots at Magnolia Cemetery may want to contact Tige Marston at the city's cemetery office at (251) 208-7307 to check on space within their lots. Some owners may be surprised to learn that lots which they had long thought full actually have room for another regular or cremation burial or burials.

Tom McGehee

Memorials to the Perpetual Care Trust Fund

In Memory of . . .

Mary Frances Alexander

Thomas J. Buhring, Sr.

Dr. Ben Busbee

Posey Hamilton

Jack Hays

Leila Hollowell

John Lutz

Libby Mann

Given by . . .

Florence & Ernest Ladd

Flossie Leatherbury

Elizabeth Buhring

Billy Walker & Mrs. Marguriete W. Gabriel

Friedman's Fine Jewelry

Billy Walker & Mrs. Marguriete W. Gabriel

Friedman's Fine Jewelry

Wolf Bay Lodge, Inc.

Sandy Harrison

Loyce Adkison

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Officers, Directors & Staff

The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery

Billy Walker & Mrs. Marguriete W. Gabriel

Friedman's Fine Jewelry

Correction

In our last issue's "A Tale of Two Taylors," I omitted a third grandchild who survives Colonel R. V. Taylor, Flossie Taylor Hollinger of Mobile. My apologies!

- Tom McGehee

Grave Spaces For Sale

At the present time there are only cremation spaces available for sale within Square 29. Please call our office for further information.

Q & A by H.F. "Tige" Marston

Q: *Who Owns Magnolia Cemetery?*

A: Magnolia Cemetery has been owned and operated as a municipal cemetery by the City of Mobile since 1836. The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery, Inc. a 501C13 non-profit organization operates the cemetery under contract with the city. Oversight of the cemetery is the responsibility of the Parks Operations and Cemeteries Division of the Department of Parks and Recreation. This city department maintains an on-site representative at Magnolia to arrange interments, maintain record systems and provide support. The Friends organization is responsible for the actual burial work as well as maintenance of the cemetery grounds and via their on site office employ a full-time executive director, superintendent and grounds crew.

Please send your questions to Q & A Magnolia, 1202 Virginia Street, Moibile, AL 36604

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY, INC.

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