

Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY
NEWSLETTER

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"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Summer 2013

Roderick MacKenzie: From Bombay to Mobile



Artist Roderick MacKenzie back from his Boston studies, ca. 1887-8. (Photo courtesy History Museum of Mobile)

The ad further explained that the judge of probate had "entered an order permitting by public or private sale, the watercolors, oils, pastels, etchings and any and all other pictures and artists supplies, and any other goods, wares and merchandise" of the late Roderick D. MacKenzie.

As curious buyers surveyed the hundreds of pieces of art created by this talented man, many surely wondered, "just who was Roderick D. MacKenzie?" They might well have been amazed that a man who had once attended garden parties with Queen Victoria had died in shabby solitude in Mobile, Alabama.

Beginnings

John and Isabelle MacKenzie left London for Mobile in 1872. Just what possessed them to select a Southern city in the throes of Reconstruction has gone unrecorded. MacKenzie had previously painted carriages in London and was talented at painting elaborate heraldic devices on the carriage doors.

In Mobile he landed a job as a painter for the New Orleans, Mobile and Texas Railroad whose yards were just two blocks south of the family's Savannah Street home. The 1880 city directory lists MacKenzie --or as they spelled it "McKenzie"--working as a painter for James McAtee, a carriage manufacturer on North Royal Street.

It was also in 1880 that John's wife, Isabelle died. She was buried in Magnolia Cemetery in a plot belonging to family friend William Turner, and a small headstone still marks her grave today. John MacKenzie was left with five children and put the youngest up for adoption to a family in Wilcox County. It would be many years before he learned of his MacKenzie connection. The next two oldest children, a boy and a girl, were shipped to Scotland to live with relatives. The oldest, Charles (b. 1868) and Roderick (b. 1865) stayed in Mobile.

John MacKenzie last appeared in the 1882 city directory where his profession was listed simply as "painter." He moved to Georgia where he died a decade later.

Roderick ended up living in an Episcopal orphanage in Spring Hill, the predecessor to today's Wilmer Hall. His father had taught him to draw at an early age and his artistic talent was immediately recognized at the orphanage. Dr. Gardiner C. Tucker, the rector at St. John's, encouraged him and quietly raised funds to send him off to art school.

On April 1, 1941 an advertisement appeared in the Mobile Register announcing that the "Pictures of Roderick D. MacKenzie may now be purchased and may be seen at the Public Library, the Admiral Semmes Hotel and at the MacKenzie Studio."

Boston and Back

In 1884, Tucker had raised sufficient scholarship funds to send the 19 year old off to study at the Boston Museum of Art. While in Boston, his talents were observed by Charlotte Elizabeth Barnes, who took an immediate liking to him. Perhaps she had heard that he was from Mobile, where her brother had recently transferred to take over the management of the Battle House.

Charles Barnes oversaw a renovation of that venerable hotel and reopened it in the fall of 1886. The hotel advertised its new passenger elevator and advised that electric lights had been “introduced in the Hotel Parlors, Dining Rooms, Offices, Hall, Billiard Room and Bar.” It also noted that Mr. Barnes had previously served the Evans House in Boston and New York’s Union Square Hotel.

After two years of study in Boston, MacKenzie returned to Mobile and parish records for Trinity Church show that he was a member there at the time. He and his brother Charles were residing nearby with the William Turner family in their home on the south east corner of Jackson and Congress streets. Mr. Turner was a partner in a grist and grain mill on Royal Street operating under the very appropriate name of Turner and Oates.

Charles MacKenzie worked as a bookkeeper for the Mobile Saddlery Company and would die unmarried in 1895.

Roderick taught art classes in a building on the north west corner of Dauphin and Conception streets. He also maintained a studio on Dauphin Street opposite St. Joseph Street where he painted portraits including those of Bishop William Wilmer and department store owner Louis Hammel. It is believed that many of the colorful Mardi Gras float drawings for the OOM’s were completed by MacKenzie.



In the 1880’s MacKenzie taught art classes within this building which occupied the north west corner of Dauphin and Conception streets. In 1914 he returned, operating his studio above a corner drugstore. Finances made it necessary for the MacKenzies to ultimately call this home. (Photo courtesy McCall Library, USA)

From Paris to Snake Charmers

Although a reporter for the *Register* termed MacKenzie “the rising young artist of Mobile,” the Port City would not hold him long. In the fall of 1889 the promising artist left for Paris to further his art studies. The cost of the trip was footed by “Lottie” Barnes whose late father had left her a comfortable inheritance. MacKenzie studied at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux Arts and began to successfully exhibit his paintings at prominent Parisian galleries.

Lottie arrived in Paris in 1891 and the couple was married. With MacKenzie at 26 and his bride at age 46 it would seem an odd match, but the two were inseparable for the next 29 years.



A view of the Taj Mahal within the collection of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society is typical of the sort of canvases MacKenzie churned out during his stay in India. He would recall being sent to India to provide such scenes which sold well to westerners curious about the “orient.” (Courtesy HMPS)

The couple left Paris for India in 1892. MacKenzie would later recall that a Parisian art dealer sent him to “paint pictures of snake charmers and tigers.” Beginning in the 1870’s western artists began depicting what was loosely termed “the Orient” often with very little regard to cultural accuracy. Artists like Louis Comfort Tiffany focused more on light and color than realism as they painted romanticized mosques and tombs in the Arabic world.

By 1893 Americans were flocking to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago to view the *danse du ventre*, or as it was more commonly known, the Belly Dance. This began a longstanding image for Westerners of Islamic society and culture. Art depicting such dancers in exotic locales sold well in both America and abroad.

In the 1890’s, Queen Victoria was reigning over India as part of the great British Empire. Surely MacKenzie, having spent his earliest years in London, felt a comradeship with the Englishmen he met. He and Lottie were apparently welcomed into the community and were even invited to a garden party attended by the Queen and was asked on hunting expeditions where he was able to see tigers in the wild.

The MacKenzies lived in a house overlooking the Bay of Bengal and had a full staff to attend them. Summer months were spent in the mountains and in both locations MacKenzie would start out daily in a horse drawn cart to explore and draw the world around him. He traveled to the border of Afghanistan and the Khyber Pass. Along the way his paintings and drawings captured the tribesmen he observed.

The artist obviously made inroads with British officials for in 1902 the British Viceroy commissioned him to create the official painting of King Edward VII's grand entrance into Delhi to be crowned Emperor of India. This monumental work stretches 18 feet in length and stands 11 feet in height. Its completion earned him the title of "Best Artist in Asia."

Queen Victoria accepted an invitation to visit his studio. Unfortunately MacKenzie was not there. At the last minute he had gone on search for the queen's favorite tea. By the time he returned her majesty had come and gone.

The couple left India for Paris in 1906 and then London became their home in 1908. MacKenzie opened a studio there and continued to enjoy the good connections established with British officials. In 1910 he again painted King Edward, although this time he was given special permission to capture the deceased monarch lying in state.

Returning to See Old Friends

MacKenzie stayed in London for five years. In December 1913, just months before Europe would plunge into war, the couple sailed for America. Lottie had reportedly urged him to return home before all his old friends were gone. MacKenzie was also burdened with debts and apparently had not been able to collect on a number of commissions.



MacKenzie moved his studio/residence to the south side of Dauphin Street just east of Joachim Street in the mid-twenties. Here he lived, taught and painted above Wells Style Shop until the National Furniture Store rented the building for warehouse space. MacKenzie was forced to move a few doors east where he died in 1941. That building was later demolished for Woolworth's. (Courtesy McCall Library, USA)

After a brief visit to New York, the couple arrived in Mobile in the fall of 1914. The couple at first stayed in the home of Erwin Craighead, Editor Emeritus of the Mobile *Register*. The Craigheads lived on St. Stephens Road in what was then a comfortable suburban setting.

In 1914, MacKenzie was the most well-trained artist in the state. He rented space for his studio in the same Dauphin Street location in which he had operated his classroom in the late 1880's. City directories indicate that he and his wife were residing in a boarding house on St. Anthony Street. In 1916 he sculpted a bust of his friend Frederick Bromberg and by 1917 he began advertising his own art school.

With the Barnes inheritance exhausted and commissions not forthcoming, the couple gave up the boarding house to live in MacKenzie's studio. The location above a corner drugstore was a far cry from the lifestyle they had enjoyed in India.

In addition to offering his services as a portrait artist, MacKenzie operated a school for aspiring artists. A 1917 brochure sought students beginning on November 1. Artists ranging from beginners to advanced were invited and classes were offered during the day as well as at night "to meet the requirements of young men who desire to pursue their study in Art after business hours." Night classes focused on "illustration and poster design" and featured a "costumed model."

Monthly tuition started at \$6 for beginners and ranged up to \$18 for a full day for more advanced students. Whatever the course selected, the brochure advised that all tuition was "payable in advance."

Lottie Barnes MacKenzie died in their apartment/studio in January of 1920 at the age of 75 and was buried in the Turner lot at Magnolia Cemetery. The rector of Trinity Church oversaw the funeral and the pallbearers included Frederick G. Bromberg, Erwin Craighead, department store owner Hammond Gayfer and local architect George B. Rogers. A hand crafted marker, apparently the work of her husband, was created to mark her grave.

His Talents Recognized

Later that year, MacKenzie's talents were recognized by the State of Alabama which named him Art Commissioner and he was invited to join the American Federation of the Arts. Over the next five years he traveled between various steel mills in the Birmingham area executing a total of 43 pastels. He preferred to create scenes at night, when the contrast between the flames and molten steel against the darkness were especially dramatic.

In 1922 he began exhibiting these pastels in Birmingham and the following year they were being shown in various galleries in New York as well as within the Brooklyn Museum of Art. In May of 1925 he was inducted into the Alabama Hall of Fame alongside Helen Keller.

That year ended on a sour note. The building which housed his studio in Mobile burned down in December. Just how much of his work went up in ashes is unknown but this may well explain why no photo of Mrs. MacKenzie seems to have survived. He moved across Dauphin Street in the block east of Joachim Street above a clothing store.

While MacKenzie's unique depictions of steel mills were admired, he never could find anyone to buy them. Neither the steel mills nor the city of Birmingham would purchase them and Mackenzie stubbornly refused to sell them separately.

In 1926, the artist's luck took a turn for the better when the State of Alabama commissioned him to create a series of canvases telling the state's history to be installed within the capitol in Montgomery. The eight large murals would bring him a \$7,500 fee, a fortune to a man who had been living a hand to mouth existence.

The murals for the capitol were finally completed in 1931. MacKenzie, ever the perfectionist, had gone to great lengths to create a scale model of the space within his studio and spared no expense in completing the murals. When the dust settled and his bills had been paid his profit was just \$1,000.

His Later Years

The final decade of MacKenzie's life was not an easy one for the aging artist. His studio rent was often in arrears yet he was known to turn down lucrative offers while ardently pursuing the sale of his pastels of steel mills. Things then got so bad that he accepted an offer to paint billboards in town.

In 1934 as the Depression worsened, MacKenzie cast a full length sculpture of himself, standing in his studio. Completed that September its novelty caught the attention of a reporter at the *Register* who interviewed the "trim white haired man in a summer suit" who exclaimed "If you think it was easy, just try casting the back of your own neck!"



In 1934 MacKenzie cast a figure of himself in bronze. Perhaps the starving artist thought the piece would bring him some publicity. Critics remarked that he often turned down lucrative offers despite being in desperate straits financially. (Photo courtesy McCall Library, USA)

Perhaps he thought the publicity might bring him some business, but as the decade continued things only got worse. He obtained work through the New Deal's WPA and created some wonderful scenes of Mobile. The work came to a halt however when it was discovered that he was not an American citizen. MacKenzie stubbornly refused to give up his British citizenship and the government refused to give him further work.

Besides the economy, MacKenzie's personality may have hindered further opportunities. It was during this era that local writer Emma Roche commented "He gets harder to deal with and is very bitter."

Throughout the mid and late 1930's, MacKenzie relied on friends' generosity to keep from starving. He would ride the Spring Hill Avenue street car out to "Georgia Cottage" as the houseguest of Dr. and Mrs. Edward Sledge for two or three days at a time. At other times he would head out to the Spring Hill home of James and Madeline Maury.

Caldwell Delaney later recalled MacKenzie in those days as "a frail and arrogant man, vain about his appearance despite severe poverty." Others found him unpleasant and overbearing. Thus the economy may not have been the only reason for his impoverished existence.

Mackenzie still had a few admirers. Mrs. Sledge felt differently and later recalled him as being "reserved – quiet and timid—but a delightful man when you started to talk to him." And apparently the Maurys held a similar opinion.

A Sad Ending

On January 28, 1941, Roderick MacKenzie died in his Dauphin Street studio. The death certificate, signed by Dr. E. S. Sledge noted he had died from complications from a perforated ulcer.

The *Mobile Register* featured a front page article about his death as well as a lengthy editorial which stated "*the flames of artistic genius in the soul of Roderick D. MacKenzie was more brilliant*"



Roderick MacKenzie and his wife Lottie rest under a simple double marker beneath one of the largest live oak trees in Magnolia Cemetery. The angled marker to the left is actually Mrs. MacKenzie's original headstone, quite possibly the work of her husband.

than the colors with which he worked.... Preoccupied with more materialistic interests than the visual arts, the community as a whole was not as appreciative of Mr. MacKenzie's talents as it might have been."

His funeral was conducted at Roche Funeral Home by the rector of Christ Church, and his pallbearers included designer Edmund DeCelle, photographer Erik Overby, artist Richebourg Gaillard, Jr., and Frank Craighead, son of his old friend Erwin.

A standard granite double marker was installed with his name and dates as well as those of Lottie's. Apparently no one thought to have Lottie's unique headstone duplicated for her husband, so hers was demoted to a footstone. Today the couple rest under one of the largest oak trees to be found in Magnolia Cemetery.

MacKenzie's art is still appreciated locally, and examples of it can be found within the collections of both Mobile's history and art museums. The History Museum of Mobile is currently organizing an exhibit focusing on his work from India and will include a small canvas to be loaned by the Historic Mobile Preservations Society depicting a familiar scene: the Taj Mahal.

- Tom McGehee

My thanks to the staffs of the History Museum of Mobile, the Mobile Museum of Art and Oakleigh for their assistance in this article.



Charles White's name adorns the face of this tall case clock in Oakleigh's Entrance Hall. The clock once stood outside the mayor's office in Mobile's city hall where generations speculated on just who Mr. White may have been.

Correction

In the Spring Issue of the Messenger a tall case clock in the front hall of Oakleigh was discussed. On the face of the clock is the name "Charles White." Although that name as a jeweler does not appear in the city directories on file at the Mobile Public Library, an undated advertisement for a jeweler by that name does appear in a booklet entitled "*Mobile Silversmiths and Jewelers 1820-1867.*" Author Sidney Adair Smith gave the dates of his work in Mobile as being between 1825 and 1842.

That newspaper advertisement describes White as being a "Watch Maker and Jeweller (sic)" and that in his shop "all kinds of watches, clocks, chronometers and other Time keepers will be carefully repaired." This would appear to be the retailer of the clock at Oakleigh.

Many thanks to Mrs. Joy Klotz for bringing this to my attention.

- Tom McGehee

❧ PRESIDENT'S LETTER ❧

Mobile's summer is always accompanied by rains of epic proportions, and to battle the rampant growth of our sub-tropical vegetation, Superintendent Mark Halseth has hired two additional crew members to assist with maintaining the cemetery. This rain also makes non-paved roads here impassable so when you visit, please drive only on the paved roads.

Gates at Old Hebrew Cemetery

We were pleased to receive a generous grant from the Ben May Charitable Trust allowing us to replicate the missing gates and four fence sections in front of the Old Hebrew Cemetery. They have recently been painted and are ready for their dedication later this fall.

Fence Sections – Only 18 Until Completion!

Our contractor will be installing eight new memorial fence sections along Virginia Street. This leaves just 18 more sections to

complete the fencing of the entire 120 acres of the main cemetery. If you have hesitated in purchasing one to honor or memorialize a family member or friend, I urge you to call Janet Savage, our Executive Director at (251) 432-8672 as soon as possible.

With the cooperation of the City of Mobile a matching fence is being planned to be installed on the south side of Virginia Street to enclose Cemetery Two. The city will be calling for bids to install corner features to match those around the older section of the cemetery. Please let us know if you would like to assist with this project by buying a section.

Trees

The Friends will be applying for a grant to plant trees within Magnolia Cemetery later this fall and winter. Board member Barbie Whitaker chairs the Horticulture Committee and she and Mark Halseth are conducting a study to determine the types of trees to be planted as well as their best placement.

Cemetery Tours

Tige Marston, City Cemetery Manager and our own Janet Savage have presented several tours in the cemetery and Tige has also conducted three off-site presentations to civic groups and schools. The Sons of Confederate Veterans held their annual Confederate Memorial Day Salute at Confederate Rest.

Once again the cemetery will be sponsoring a series of three different walking tours on three Saturdays in November. Take advantage of the cool temperatures and plan to attend one, or more as you learn about both history and funerary art. Please reserve your space by calling Tige Marston at (251) 208-7307 or Janet Savage at (251) 432-8672.

Membership

Your membership helps us in our continuing restoration and maintenance of historic Magnolia Cemetery. Your membership dues and generous donations supplement city funding, allowing us to properly maintain this historic site. We could not do it without your help.

Please keep your membership current and encourage your friends to join us as we work towards our next 175 years! A membership form is included in this issue.

- Douglas Burtu Kearley, Sr. AIA, NCARB
President, Friends of Magnolia Cemetery



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

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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- 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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- Renewal I am a new member.

Name _____

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Phone _____ Square _____ Lot No. _____

- Please contact me to work on volunteer projects.


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Please, Don't Forget your Friends!

RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP TODAY

Thank you for your support!

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

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY, INC.

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