

# Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY  
NEWSLETTER

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*"Remove not the ancient Landmark"*

Summer 2022

## An Historic Home and its Builder

Mobile, Alabama is home to many historic homes and unlike other cities in the state, it boasts five which are furnished and open to the public. In age they range from the Conde-Charlotte House of 1822 to the Bellingrath Home completed in 1936. And from the Italianate town house of Charles Richards to the suburban "villas" of Oakleigh and the Bragg Mitchell Mansion each is quite different in style and the stories they tell.

All of these houses are historic and are well documented, and all share something else. The Magnolia Cemetery is the permanent home of most of the occupants of those houses. And like the houses our cemetery is full of history, stories and memorable architecture.

This issue will discuss the Richards family and the magnificent brick home they constructed in what is now known as the DeTonti Square District.

### A Monroe County Beginning

Charles Greenleaf Richards was born in the village of Hallowell, Maine in 1817. At the age of 17 he moved to the American frontier – Alabama – to seek his fortune. At first he was in the growing river trade as steamboats improved and made the transport of cotton and merchandise possible between the port of Mobile and river landings to the north. He eventually made it to captain, although the name of the vessel or vessels at his command are unknown.



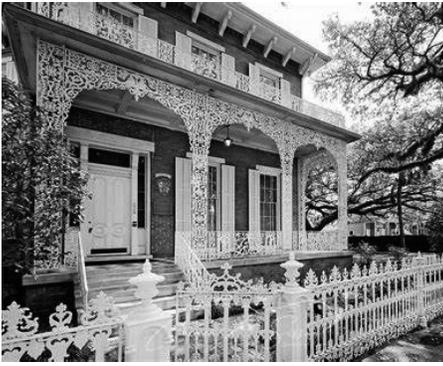
What is known is that in 1841, Captain Richards married Caroline Elizabeth Steele of Claiborne, Ala. Her father, Stephen Steele had begun obtaining tracts of land in Monroe County as early as 1833 but according to the 1850 census, the 59 year old native Virginian gave his occupation as "watchmaker."



The Richards set up house originally in Claiborne where their first child Frances Emeline was born in 1842. She died at the age of 10 by which time the family had moved to Mobile where Charles Richards' occupation was listed as "merchant."

Charles Richards is listed as a partner in the wholesale grocery firm of Richards, McGinnis & Co. at 31 North Commerce Street in 1861, but just five years later the next directory lists the firm as C. G. Richards & Co. Edward McGinnis his former partner was a New Jersey native and apparently did not stick around when war broke out. According to the 1870 census records, McGinnis, his wife, their two children and three female servants were living in Brooklyn, N.Y. where his occupation was listed as "banker."

The wholesale grocery trade had obviously made both Richards and his partner wealthy men. In 1860, the Richards moved into their new home at 69 North Joachim Street, a house that would remain in the family until 1946.



*Dating to 1860 this Italianate townhouse with its outstanding cast iron fence and gallery is one of Mobile's five historic house museums.*

## The Richards House

At first, Charles and Caroline Richards occupied a home on the west side of North Joachim nearly facing the site which now holds a house which has been linked to the Richards name

for generations. With a growing family and a booming business the couple began construction on a new home on the street's east side which was completed in 1860. The design for the Richards house followed familiar designs popular for city dwellings in Mobile at the time. It is unclear who the architect – if indeed there was one – might have been. The floor plan features a familiar Mobile side hall plan which runs parallel to double parlors separated by pocket doors. A side wing opening into the back parlor contains the dining room. There are several things which set this bracketed Italianate home apart from others of the period in Mobile.

The most obvious element is the use of an unusual cast iron railing on the front gallery. Here interspersed with pierced scrolling iron lace are four arched panels with allegorical figures which depict the four seasons. Today this remains once of Mobile's most iconic images.

Through a door surrounded by etched Bohemian case glass the hall widens beyond where a graceful curving stairway leads upwards. The parlors feature elaborately carved mantels imported from Italy. Ornate figural gasoliers adorn the front and rear parlors. At some point in the past the simpler brown marble mantel in the dining room has been painted white.

Beside each fireplace is a silver plated handle which was originally attached to wire stretching to eight brass bells of graduated sizes mounted on coiled steel springs. Located on the back porch each had a distinctive ring identifying the particular room. The bells are long gone but the handles as well as the silver-plated door hardware throughout remain today.

Behind the dining room where rest rooms exist today, was a butler's pantry. The kitchen was in the back wing connected to the main house by a porch. This room was flanked by a store room and a pantry which a later generation recalled being used for canning.

A small cellar is reached from an outdoor stair. Although many a tour guide has termed this a "wine cellar" the staunchly Presbyterian Richards family probably used it as a root cellar.

The second floor held spacious bedrooms in the main portion of the home. A door at the back of the upper hall led to a porch a porch enclosed with louvered shutters. Here in the back wing were three bedrooms for the Richards' sons – a garconniere. At the end of this porch was the only bathroom in the house.

In the yard outside the back porch was a large cistern which collected rain water. The volunteer fire department of the day used the water here to fight blazes in the neighborhood before the Bienville Water Works was established.

The building at the back of the property had space for four horses and the family's coach. A pen nearby held an assortment of chickens and ducks.

## The Richards Lot

Beneath one of Magnolia Cemetery's magnificent oak trees rest members of the Charles Richards family. The markers are relatively modest. Glancing at the dates, two of the youngest children were born in the family's magnificent home on Joachim Street. Edward was born in May of 1861, while the youngest, Joseph, was born there on December 10, 1867. At least two of the oldest were born in Claiborne.

Sadly, and tellingly, 44 year old Caroline Richards died just five days after Joseph's birth. And tragically, Joseph joined her on March 24 of the



*One of the ornately carved Italian marble mantels within the Richards House.*

following year at barely three months of age. Charles remained in the family home until his death in 1894 at the age of 77. He had retired from the grocery trade but owned a shingle manufacturing business north of the city for a number of years. His will provided for his six surviving children with his son William, who was also his business partner, named as executor.



*The oak shaded Richards lot in Magnolia Cemetery today.*

### **A Changing Neighborhood**

The DeTonti Square Neighborhood today is thriving today but in the early 20th century it was experiencing a decline in population. Commercial encroachment from St. Joseph Street pushed residents to the west. The arrival of the automobile caused two problems for the neighborhood. St. Louis Street was promoted as a faster route west than Government Street leading to increased traffic. Secondly, the auto dealers discovered that street which soon became "Auto Row." Side streets soon were crowded with businesses catering to car repairs and the residential value of the district diminished.

And by the 1920's a house of ill repute was operating in the block opposite the Richards' home. What's more it was right next door to the manse for Trinity Episcopal Church which was located in this neighborhood. The young minister turned in his resignation after being repeatedly awoken by men looking for his neighbor's establishment. To keep him that church eventually moved the church brick by brick out to Dauphin Street where it stands today.

As the roaring decade came to a close the last of the children of Caroline and Charles Richards joined them in Magnolia Cemetery. The household was down to two of their daughters by that time: Leila Richards Barnewall (born 1853) and her much younger sister, Clara Richards McMillan (born 1869).

### **The Marrying Mr. Barnewall**

In 1895 Leila had married William Barnewall. Mr. Barnewall's first wife, Mary Hopkins, was the daughter of a Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court who was later the president of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. Her stepmother, Juliet, earned the name of "The Florence Nightingale of the South" during the Civil War.

After Mary's death in 1871 William married the widowed Mary Emanuel Kennedy whose father Jonathon had been one of the city's wealthiest merchants. Her late husband, Joshua Kennedy had been an heir to a large real estate fortune but had died in Virginia at the start of the Civil War. The handsome columned mansion he had built for her still stands at the south east corner of Government and Dearborn streets.

By the time of Mary's death in 1894, she had traded her home for her parents' on the south west corner of Government and Joachim streets. It was her will that left that magnificent home to Christ Church along with her jewels specifying they be made into "a chalice as magnificent as a chalice can be." Although that church long ago sold the home for the construction of the Admiral Semmes Hotel, the Barnewall Chalice is still magnificent and is still being used for special occasions in that church.

A year later Barnewall married Leila Richards and died in 1898 leaving her the bulk of his estate.

### **The McMillans**

Henry McMillan had married their daughter Clara in 1881 and was a partner in a feed, grain and fertilizer business down on North Commerce Street. The couple had made the Richards house their home after their marriage and here they raised their family.

Mr. McMillan died in 1928, leaving the occupants of the house down to his widow and her sister Leila. By the fall of 1930 both sisters had joined other family members in Magnolia Cemetery.

### **From Rooming House to Office Space**

According to city directories the house was rented out to different tenants and by 1946 was a rooming house occupied by four individuals. It was in that year that the

newly arrived Ideal Cement Company bought the house and began a three year renovation to turn it into their local headquarters. Bathrooms were added and the back galleries were enclosed. The cistern was removed and the carriage house altered.

One of the most interesting repairs made by the cement company was filling in a two inch crack in the exterior wall by the curving front staircase. That crack had been there since the federal magazine exploded on May 26, 1865 on the riverfront, killing hundreds and causing over \$700,000 in damage.

In 1973 the company transferred the Richards House over to the city of Mobile. In an arrangement still in place today the maintenance and operation of the property as a house museum was turned over to the four local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The house is open for tours and can be rented out for special occasions. For further information call (251) 208-7320 or visit their website at [www.richardsdarhouse.com](http://www.richardsdarhouse.com)

Tom McGehee



*The entrance hall with its curving staircase under the ownership of Ideal Cement Company. The firm restored the house for their offices and repaired a large crack in the stair wall dating to 1865.*

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*So far 2022 has proceeded with a bang at Magnolia Cemetery. There is much which to report and celebrate in terms of work completed and commenced since your last newsletter. Let us take a look at some tangible signs of preservation stewardship:*

### *Fencing*

*Several years ago, the Friends completed the installation of fencing around Magnolia Cemetery proper thanks to a generous bequest from the late Arch Winter. Since that time, attention has focused on Magnolia II or "Little Magnolia" on the south side of Virginia Street. Eight new fencing sections of the same design as those surrounding Magnolia Cemetery have been installed along the Virginia Street frontage of Magnolia II. The new fencing will provide both additional curb appeal to Virginia Street and protection for burial markers within Magnolia II. Not only does the design continue the aesthetic established by the fencing surrounding "Big Magnolia", but also harmonizes with the fencing circling other cemeteries in the area.*



### *Restoration*

*Shortly before the close of the year, Pratt Paterson and members of the Restoration Committee met with Matt Gage, the director of the Office of Archaeological Research (OAR). It was Matt and his team from OAR who recently completed the restoration of eight historic monuments scattered across Magnolia Cemetery. The marble markers, coping sections, and urns were among the most damaged in the Cemetery. Restored with historically appropriate mortar and structural support to prevent future damage, these markers are once again lasting memorials to those individuals whose lives they recognize and testaments to their place in Mobile history.*

### *Horticulture*

*The Horticulture and Arboretum Committee, which is under the able leadership of Sallye Irvine, is making great strides in putting the “m” back in Magnolia Cemetery. Not limiting the scope to magnolia trees alone, Sallye is working with Mark Halseth, Magnolia’s longtime cemetery manager, to realize a sustainable and beautiful approach to bringing a tree canopy back to the Cemetery. So far during the spring, a number of magnolia grandiflora trees have been planted.*

### *Gate House*

*If you have visited the cemetery lately you will notice that the building formerly housing the Friends’ offices is under restoration. The federal government which owns the old gate house structure is bringing it back to an historically accurate design. We look forward to our eventual return and in the meantime are operating on the property out of temporary quarters..*

### *Signage*

*Douglas B. Kearley has arranged for new signage and maps to be installed within the cemetery this summer. The old ones were looking a bit tired.*

*As this letter hints, things do not go into hibernation at Magnolia Cemetery during the winter months. A great staff and support from Friends are responsible for the preservation of one of Mobile’s greatest cultural landscapes. On behalf of the Board, I thank you for your contributions to and interest in Magnolia Cemetery.*

*Sincerely and Respectfully,  
Cartledge W. Blackwell, III – “Cart”*



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~ Summer 2022 ~

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