

Montevallo

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PUTTING SHOAL CREEK TO WORK

Submitted by Marty Everse

Montevallo became Montevallo in large measure due to Shoal Creek. Mills, grist and saw, often begat towns in the early history of frontier settlement, and before the advent of steam engines, mills were powered by water. Montevallo was no exception. As early as the Spring of 1818 in the Shelby County Court minutes a mill was noted near Jesse Wilson's homestead and of course Jesse has been heralded as the founder of Wilson's Hill, the original name of Montevallo. Five years later, a fellow from Georgia, Thomas T. Walker, received permission from the court to erect a nine foot dam on Shoal Creek to power his mill. That mill, the first to regularly grind wheat in the entire Cahaba Valley, became a landmark and its location at Montevallo was included in John LaTourette's acclaimed 1837 map of Alabama and West Florida.

Walker operated the mill until 1845, when at age 65 he sold it to Alexander Nelson, a young man on the rise. Nelson, a great grandson of John Sevier, a buddy of Andrew Jackson and one-time Tennessee governor, had recently married Edward Powell's daughter, Mary. Powell had died in 1837 but had been a wealthy and influential man about town. Nelson was appointed Montevallo postmaster for a short period in 1846 and by 1850, his grist and sawmill was worth \$9,000 producing flour, corn meal, and lumber with four employees and was by far the most extensive operation of its kind in Shelby County. He sold his flour as far away as Selma, Marion, and Greensboro hauling it there in wagons. Even with the far flung market, however, Nelson claimed, "I made nothing on the investment."

After operating the mill for eight years, Nelson sold the place to John P. Figh, a contractor who had been involved in the construction of the State Capitol building and who owned a large brick works in Montgomery. Figh renovated the mill, changing the machinery from wood to iron, and kept it until 1863 when he sold it to Abner Wells, a prosperous Montevallo landowner and Justice of the Peace. Within a short time, the mill, now described as "a large four story framed flouring mill and grist mill rendered efficient by a long raceway," burned and was never rebuilt. Despite this loss, Shoal Creek had become Montevallo's industrial corridor. John S. Storrs constructed and operated a tannery just a hop, skip, and jump downstream in the early 1850s while George Allen and George Rogan toiled away in their cabinet shop nearby. During the Civil War, Tharp & Hollingsworth's iron foundry produced pots, pans, and kettles for the Confederate government. All this manufacturing was powered by the waters of Shoal Creek.



Montevallo Mill, circa 1897. The structure was just downstream from Orr Park near the present concrete dam. (Alabama Dept. of Archives & History)

Following the Civil War, E. G. Walker resurrected the tannery and added a wool carder and grist mill, a cotton factory was established by Lyman and Davis, and later J. T. Ellis & Company ran a sawmill, all powered by the creek. Yet as steam engines and then electricity gained prominence, the importance of Shoal Creek waned. Only the E. G. Walker grist mill held on and continued to operate intermittently under different owners well into the twentieth century.

Hubert Irvin Edward Dyer, he went by H.I.E., was the final miller. He first advertised that "the Montevallo mill grinds corn into good old fashioned home-made meal" in 1938. With the exception of a few years during World War II, the mill's wheels continued to turn. Dyer tried everything to keep it a going concern. In 1948, his wife, Addie Belle, opened the "Make-It Shop" at the mill pitching dress making, hemstitching, and button holes. Dyer, himself, launched a self-service laundry announcing he had installed 10 new Bendix washing machines that would enable customers to have 30 minute service. By 1952, however, the family had shut-down the mill and moved to Pensacola for a brief time. The days of harnessing Shoal Creek had ended.

Upon returning to Montevallo, Dyer expanded the original millhouse using it to store building materials and vehicles. During a lightning storm, Thursday night, June 19, 1969, neighbors heard an explosion. Retired fire chief Red Mahan noticed flames and called in the alarm. Montevallo fire fighters fought the blaze that would reach more than 100 feet in the air with sparks falling more than three blocks away for more than five hours. There were no injuries.