

Montevallo

Historical SocietySM

Opening the Portals of Our Heritage

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THE MOGUL OF MONTEVALLO

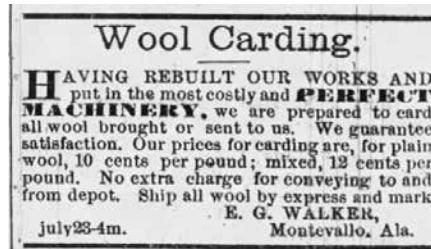
Marty Everse

E. G. Walker had pluck. Born in Scotland, he first emerged in the historical records in Chattanooga as a 29 year old brick mason complete with a North Hamptonshire, English bred wife in 1850. Within the next decade he really came into his own. By 1860, he owned a retail store and plugged away mining coal in the romantically named community of Running Water, Tennessee, where he would be appointed postmaster within a year. Not only did Walker mine coal, he took the process one step further and produced coke, winning a "diploma" or first place award for his barrel of coke entered under the Curiosities and Miscellaneous Articles category at the first annual exhibition of the State Mechanics Institute held at Nashville in 1855.

When the Civil War began, the market for his coal boomed. The Confederate government purchased large quantities for use in Chattanooga as well as Knoxville and shipped it as far away as Macon, Georgia for use in the Arsenal there. But the flush times came to a screeching halt in the summer of 1863 with the arrival of the Union Army. By the end of the war, one newspaper noted that Walker "was left without any of this world's goods."

Not one to sit around and lament losses, E. G. resurfaced in Montevallo in 1866 as a partner in the mercantile firm of McConaughy & Company, however, by the fall of that year the business dissolved by mutual consent. Walker then jumped back down into a coal pit leasing the mines at Aldrich for a short time. By 1870, he tackled the lime business, operating a kiln three miles out of Montevallo and employing 25 to 30 hands, mostly freedmen, averaging about 60 barrels per day. Not satisfied with burning limestone, Walker then plunged into the leather trade buying the tannery on the bank of Shoal Creek from the John S. Storrs estate for \$5,000 in 1871. There he excelled. Within a year he added a wool carder and soon thereafter a grist mill. The county newspaper lauded his efforts. "Mr. Walker's place is a perfect hive of industry. Besides his Wool Carder, he has an excellent grist mill and tannery which is one of the largest and best arranged in the South, and the leather manufactured is a very superior article."

In 1874 Montevallo, E. G. Walker was a man to be reckoned with, a successful businessman, prominent member of the local Democratic Club and Grange chapter and Worshipful Master of the Masonic Lodge. Then tragedy struck. Around midnight, November 22, 1874, a devastating tornado dropped out of the sky and churned



E. G. Walker believed in the power of advertising and blanketed the tabloids from Birmingham to Selma with ads like this one from the Selma Times Argus, October 1875.

up Shoal Creek destroying everything in its path. The tannery, grist mill, and wool carder were obliterated. An eyewitness recounted that "not a house, paling or anything else was left standing on the premises, and most of the timber was blown away." Walker's losses were estimated at \$7,000.

Once again, E. G. was forced to start from scratch. He wasted no time. By daylight the next day he had 25 hands at work cleaning up preparing to rebuild and the next spring everything was up and running and then the good times rolled. His leather sold as far away as Boston and his home-made bridles and harness were pronounced second to none. He blanketed the papers with ads touting, "Our carder is new and of the most perfect and costly kind. We flatter ourselves we can turn out as good work as can be done North or South." In the next few years he constructed a "large commodious and well-arranged" store house and a residence for himself described as an "ornament to the town," on the corner of Shelby and Island Streets. His fame spread. In the Birmingham papers, he was known as the "Mogul of Montevallo." His wife, Ann, shared in the celebrity growing "the finest cabbage head in the county" measuring 36 inches around according to the town paper.

As the years went by, tanning faded and the wool carder and grist mill as well as his varied real estate holdings were his primary means of support. He remained active in politics and was elected a state representative on the Independent ticket for the 1884-1885 term.

The end of the Walker saga occurred in the 1890s. Ann Walker passed away in September 1893 after a lingering illness. Three months later, Walker died suddenly of a heart attack. His body was carried to Chattanooga and buried beside his wife. At his death, his estate included his mill property, residence, 2 store houses, 6 rental houses scattered around town and about 100 acres of land. In commenting on E. G. Walker's "pluck and energy" following the 1874 tornado, the editor of the Shelby Guide wrote, "I am not accustomed to flattery, but he is a man I must say unique, take him all in all we shall never look upon his like again." That sentiment certainly applied to him 19 years later.