

# Montevallo

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### J. W. MAHAN WAS A SCALAWAG

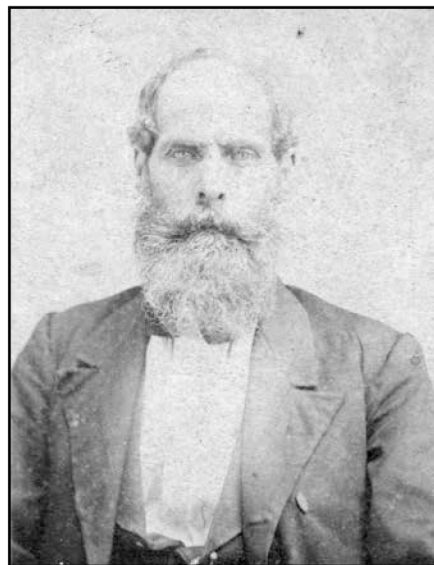
Submitted by Marty Everse

Jesse Wilkerson Mahan was a scalawag. At least that is what a native white Alabamian Republican was called in the immediate years following the Civil War. His compatriots were carpetbaggers and the newly enfranchised freedmen. With their support and fellow scalawags he became Montevallo's first Republican state senator, winning the seat in the 1868 election to represent all of Shelby and Bibb Counties in the Alabama legislature. It helped that many former Confederates were barred from voting or just refused to vote.

Given Jesse's background, it may be a bit surprising he chose this political path. The Mahans were never hesitant to pick up a musket and run off to war. His grandfather was a Revolutionary War veteran and his father and two uncles followed Andrew Jackson into the thick of the Creek Indian War. Jesse owned 8 slaves in 1860 but refused to raise his hand against the Union. In a deposition following the war, he swore he was "a Union man and never acknowledged any other than United States government at any time or place. My sentiments and position were well known among my acquaintances and neighbors. I didn't do a solitary thing in favor of secession or rebellion except what I was forced to do." He did do what he could to support the Union. He declared, "I fed Union men's widows during the war, and did this on account of preference for their Union sentiments. I had no opportunity to assist the Union cause more, the surroundings was such that I could not have done anything without imperiling my safety."

Life wasn't particularly stress-free for him during the war. Turning 47 years old in 1863, he was threatened with conscription, being forced into the Confederate army. To avoid that he wrangled a position at the Brierfield Iron Works, a government facility, as boss of the wagon shop there. A year later, he was again threatened with being sent to the front if he did not sell 33 acres of land along Mahan Creek containing a lime quarry to the Confederate government. He gave-in to that deal selling the property for \$1,200 in Confederate currency, but insisted he "turned this money over to the use of other parties, not liking to use it."

After the war while the Yankee army occupied the state, Jesse entered politics and was elected a delegate to the 1867 Constitutional Convention representing Bibb County and the following year won the senatorial seat for Shelby and Bibb Counties, a position he held until 1872. In that year he lost to Rufus W. Cobb, a Montevallo lawyer, a Democrat, and a future Alabama governor. In Montevallo, Jesse received just 12 votes while Cobb garnered 299.



*In spite of being a scalawag, Jesse did have his supporters. At one time he served as the Worshipful Master in the Montevallo Masonic Lodge and as a Justice of the Peace in Beat 8, Bibb County.*

During Jesse's politicking days, he raised the ire of a famous neighbor, Josiah Gorgas. Gorgas was a former Confederate general and was superintending the Brierfield Iron Works at the time. Gorgas wrote his wife before she joined him at Brierfield, "There is no doubt that Mahan is a bad man & it would give me sincere pleasure, after what I know he has said, to break his head but I dare say I shall be able to forego that pleasure." In a sweet and sad turn of events, Gorgas' wife, Amelia, for whom the University of Alabama's library is named, was at the bedside of Jesse's wife when she died in 1869. Amelia wrote, "Poor Mrs. Mahan died on Monday at 4 o'clock a.m. She sent for me just after breakfast & I remained until she was unconscious but could not see her die. Though almost speechless when I arrived, she kissed me fondly & said she wished I could go with her. I repeated some short consolatory sentences for she could not hear a prayer. I think I was her chief comfort to the last."

When Jesse died in the spring of 1884, a large crowd accompanied his coffin to the Cedar Grove burying ground at Brierfield. The Shelby Sentinel, published in Calera, noted his passing, "We regret to announce the death last evening of Judge Jesse Mahan, an old and respected citizen of Bibb. Judge Mahan represented the senatorial district during the Radical regime. Although a Republican in sentiment, he was not ultra."