

# Montevallo *Historical* Times

Vol. 2 No. 3

Newsletter of the Montevallo Historical Society

Summer 2018

## "Founder" Jesse Wilson Was Not Alone

by Marshal Roy Cunningham

Traditionally, in the South, when we speak of the founder of a town, we cite the name of the first male settler, as if he is the only one who made the effort and thus gets all the credit. We know that the place now called Montevallo was the home for hundreds of years of Native American people, as the fresh water springs, the rocky creek, and the fertile fields were ideal for settlement. But for the purpose of describing the founding of an American town, we ignore anything that happened before 1607 and skip forward to the coming of the Europeans and the building of the American nation.

As a descendant of the Wilson family, the namesake of "Wilson's Hill" (Montevallo's name before being changed to Montevallo in the 1820's), I feel I have the right and duty to speak up about the practice of designating a "founder", and to give my opinion on the matter.

Jesse Wilson and his brother Benjamin were soldiers of General Andrew Jackson and joined his troops for the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1813. They liked the area and began a series of scouting trips even before the land opened for frontier settlement. Jesse was probably here staking out a claim as early as 1815. His lands had to be sold in Madison County, and he had to construct a cabin for his family in a place with no roads for travel except Indian paths, and with hostile Creeks still in the vicinity. He might have made the final move to what would become Montevallo a bit sooner, but the winter of 1817 is a safe estimate to place him here with his family in time to plant a crop the following spring.

That first night in 1817, when Jesse Wilson laid his head upon his corn shuck pillow, he was not alone. In fact, he was very much not alone. With him was his

wife Elizabeth, two sons (William and Jesse), and seven daughters (Jane, Nancy, Lucretia, Elizabeth, Hannah, Lydia, and Martha). Later another daughter, Mariah, would be added to complete his family.

But we here note that, among those present that first night, we should not forget Charles, Nelly, Andrew, Westley, Isaiah, Elmira, Emily, Calvin, Rachel, Fanny, Mary, Moses, Spencer, and London, African Americans brought with the family in bondage as property. Each of them laid their heads upon their corn shuck pillows also when the sun set, and therefore must be given credit as founders and "first settlers" of the town of Montevallo.

I find that by counting the members of the family in 1817, Jesse and his family numbered eleven. By counting the members of the African Americans whom he brought with him, the number is fourteen. Thus we can say that our town had, on the first day of its pioneer settlement, a population of twenty-five. Jesse Wilson's name may be on the historic marker in front of the CVS store, and the tradition of naming a single "founder" is well established, but today we should remember that fourteen African Americans as well as Jesse and his wife and children were all present since "day one", and all must be given credit as the first settlers of our beautiful mountain-valley village.

I pause here to pay homage to Montevallo teachers such as Blanche Cogger and Barbara Belisle who inspired me as a junior high student to develop a life-long love of history. Emily V. Pendleton taught us in advanced summer school classes how to do research correctly, and my grandfather's first cousin Glennie Dee Clark instilled in me her love of the Old South. College professors such as David Morgan and Reuben Triplett and Justin Fuller helped me to become a careful student of social studies, and to rethink how history needs to be rewritten sometimes to reflect changing methods and additional truths.

Montevallo's pioneer Jesse Wilson was not a calm



(Inset) Lucretia Wilson Cunningham, niece of Jesse Wilson, and wife of planter Joseph H. Cunningham. Her parents were Benjamin and Hannah (Harless) Wilson of Montevallo. Benjamin was Jesse's brother and my great-great-great-grandfather. He remained in Montevallo as did several of his descendants down to myself.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

## President's Letter

A "Catch 22". "Between a rock and a hard place". "On the horns of a dilemma". That's where I find myself as I write this quarter's President's Letter. The recently founded Montevallo Historical Society, an organization committed "to promote, support, and effect preservation of historically significant structures, sites, and other things relating to Montevallo, Alabama" sits at a crossroads. Certainly, many of our members have fond personal memories of the Jeter Building, but most understood, I think, that the structure was in sore need of rehabilitation. Many were saddened to see its demolition, but I believe most local residents appreciated the practical factors involved in the ultimate decision. Fortunately, the recent groundbreaking for the new Center For The Arts holds promise for another iconic structure on the corner of Oak and North Boundary.

On the other hand, the excitement of this new building is overshadowed by concerns related to the proposed destruction of two antebellum houses: the Lyman-Saylor House (c. 1858) and the Cary-Calkins-Hall House (c. 1850). Local information networks reported that the university intended to demolish those two structures to gain more parking spaces. Needless to say, that news prompted a groundswell of opposition among those who held personal connections to the buildings and/or to the former residents. Numerous members of the historical society and residents of the local community contacted me to ask what might be done to preserve those two structures. As a "native son" with direct connections to the university, I seem to be strategically poised to voice their concerns.

An email message from UM Vice President Mary Ellen Heuton on April 25 notified the campus community that no demolition was planned for this summer. She also stated that the summer months would be used to gather information and that listening sessions would be conducted

in the fall. In response, I forwarded a message from Ms. Lisa Jones, Executive Director of the Alabama Historical Commission, in which she replied to a query from David Pritchett. Among other things, Ms. Jones mentioned grants administered by the AHC, assistance afforded by Montevallo's involvement in the Certified Local Government program, and potential restrictions/ramifications based on the Memorial Preservation Act of 2017. This news was encouraging, but we know that difficult decisions still lie ahead.

In light of the complex issues mentioned above, I would like to encourage members of the Montevallo Historical Society and other concerned citizens to stay informed about these proceedings. Might we attempt a combined Town & Gown fundraising effort to gain the moneys necessary to preserve these houses and to restore their safe use for various activities? Perhaps, but it seems that efforts to save these houses must originate among local citizens. Other structures like the Mahler home and the Thiemonge house also need considerable "TLC" and, more importantly, money in order to be saved. Therefore, I'd like to encourage members of the historical society and other local residents to be involved in the decision-making process. I trust that this dilemma will serve as a catalyst for unity and common cause rather than as a destructive process for division. Please consider being part of the solution. Voice your ideas. Consider donating or raising funds. Write a grant proposal. Put your civic mindedness into action. But, most of all, "let everything be done decently and in order" – for the common good – for Montevallo.



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## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

person by nature. He was known to drink, play cards, gamble, and get into fist fights. The Wilson brothers and sisters seemed always to be on the edge of civilization. Jesse and his older brother Benjamin, his sisters Lucretia Hancock, Elizabeth Lawler, Nancy Baker, and Hannah Frost and their husbands, would move to a frontier location, clear the land, build log houses and barns, and wait for those less concerned with the dangers of the wilderness to appear. The families would then "sell out" and resettle in a location further west. They began in Burke County, North Carolina, pausing in the hills of Tennessee somewhere near Knox County, then moved west to Anderson County by 1800, to Rutherford County by 1806, to Madison County, Alabama by 1808, and finally dropped down to Shelby County by 1817 after the Creek Wars.


Jesse Wilson built his cabin "on a large bluff above the big spring near an old Indian clearing." More than one location has been named as the site of his home place. The "big spring" could be the one flowing in Orr Park, the "big bluff" being the massive and steep hill behind the spring, and the "Indian clearing" the field behind the gazebo. Another "big bluff" is the hill upon which the attractive new City Hall now sits, above a second but smaller fresh water spring. Miss Meroney thought the cabin may have been near Shiloh Church (wasn't a log cabin found to be inside of a house near there not too many years ago?). All three sites can be debated. What we do know is that he stopped here, he liked what he saw, and he built a cabin somewhere near the creek.

Jesse was more than just a rough backwoodsman. He represented Shelby County as member of the House in the 2nd Session of the Alabama Territorial Legislature in St. Stephens in 1818. Jesse also represented Shelby County when Alabama became a state in 1819 at the First Annual Session in Huntsville in October-December. His political career was just beginning.

By 1819, Jesse was in the process of moving to Dallas County, Alabama, to be near the new State Capital city of Cahawba, and to participate in the founding of Selma, but his health was failing. He actually wrote his Last Will in Montevallo in June of 1820, relocated to a farm near Selma, and died there in September of the same year. He was 44 years old. Mrs. Wilson died ten years later. She and her daughter Jane Wilson McQuirter, wife of Francis McQuirter, are buried in the Montevallo cemetery. Jane McQuirter's tombstone is the oldest marked grave there. Six of Jesse's eight daughters died as teenagers. Jesse's son William was so concerned about his sisters dying young that he made his children bathe every day in cold well water in the belief that doing so would make them stronger.

I stood at the grave of Jesse Wilson on a bleak

windy day in 1996 on a bluff in the countryside outside of Selma, Alabama and pondered the journeys of this man who was partly responsible for my life taking place in Montevallo. A single large obelisk marks his resting place along with three of his daughters. No other graves are there, as it was intended as the beginning of a private family cemetery on the lands he had purchased near the new city. A new housing development stood nearby. Although Jesse Wilson had been travelling for many years, the move to Dallas County would be the end of his quest for taming the wilderness and developing a political career. His two sons inherited his farm lands and city lots, but they also inherited their father's desire to move on. William sold his part and moved to Coosa County, and son Jesse went to Texas. I guess in a way their father would be proud of that.



Wesley Wyatt

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The Red Barn, D.A. Sims

## **We, The Students of Montevallo High School**

Collection and Supervision of Material

Miss Vinnie Lee Walker

Supervision of Art Work

Mrs. Virginia Barnes

This first issue of "We, The Students" is a collection of creative writing and silk screen prints done by students of Montevallo High School. In it are shown the feelings and thoughts of many of our students. We have made the collection with the hope that it will encourage others in our school to do creative writing and art work and that it will show our parents and friends the type of creative work we are doing.

## COAL MINES

The clank of running machinery, then silence.  
Flying coal dust,  
Busy, black men hurrying about,  
A chain of squatty cars rising from the black mouth  
of the mines,  
A train puffing dark gray smoke into the sky,  
A shiny black mountain of slate,  
Small shacks scattered about the hillside,  
Black water dripping from frames of steel and wood,  
Trees burdened with heavy black dust,  
Men shouting and signaling to one another above all  
the noise,  
Empty coal cars flying back into the darkness  
of the mines,  
A stream of tired black-faced men emerging up the steep  
man way of the mines.

Betty Dement, Jr. III

## BELOW:

An original print entitled "Getting the Wash" by renowned Alabama College artist and art professor, Virginia Barnes.



We thank Emily Pendleton for sharing with us a unique copy of a literary magazine published by students at Montevallo High School during World War II. She said that Catherine Legg had given it to her originally but Emily concluded that the Montevallo Historical Society was a logical home for this interesting and entertaining record of the lives of local high school students in wartime. We present here a sampling of what the magazine contains. You can find the entire magazine in pdf format at [www.historicmontevallo.org](http://www.historicmontevallo.org).

**--- Third General Meeting of 2018 ---**  
**Sunday, July 15, 2018 • Parnell Library 2:00 pm**  
**Program Topic: The Houses of Highland Avenue**  
**--- Social Hour and Refreshments to Follow the Meeting ---**

At our last meeting in April, presentations were made by Terry Arnold and David Schneider dealing with the Perry-Mahler house and property that was bequeathed to the City of Montevallo by Mrs. Betty Mahler.

You can view a video of these important presentations at [www.historicmontevallo.org](http://www.historicmontevallo.org).



# Historical Society Initiates Mayoral Photo Project

by Clay Nordan

This all got started as I was having a conversation with Montevallo Bicentennial Committee Chairman Pam Brown Phagan when she mentioned that she could not find a collection of photographs of former Montevallo mayors.

She assumed that they had been stored somewhere in the old city hall during the construction of the new building and that they would come to light so they could be displayed in the new council chamber. Pam said that a similar photo collection of former council members had been located and would be available for display in the new chamber.

After hearing all this, a light bulb of recognition went off in my head. I didn't know anything about the city's group of photos of former mayors, but I remembered that I had seen something similar during a private tour of the Aldrich Coal Mine Museum early in 2017.

Mr. Henry Emfinger, at my request, had taken a few hours on a Friday afternoon and led me through the two buildings that make up his highly interesting and entertaining museum, which is housed in the old Montevallo Mining Company's commissary building and adjacent Farrington Hall.

In addition to all the displays and artifacts pertaining to mining that Mr. Emfinger has collected and preserved, he also has an extensive archive of local historical materials and photographs. I remembered that he had a photo gallery in a basement room of Far-

rington Hall of former Montevallo mayors that caught my eye, primarily because one of the photos was of my grandfather, W.M. "Mack" Wyatt, who was mayor from 1948-1966. I had never seen this photo!

After Pam explained her problem to me, I immediately told her that I knew where a set of these photos was located, and that it might be possible to borrow them and make new copies that could be used in the city hall display.

I made a commitment to Pam to look into the situation and see what might be arranged. I enlisted the help of fellow Montevallo Historical Society director, Anne Thomas, when I learned by accident that she was friendly with Mr. Emfinger's daughter, Rachele Lewis.

Anne began to inquire about the possibility of getting access to the pictures, and after a time, was able to borrow them for copying. Some of the photos are in less than desirable condition, so some restoration and reconditioning will be needed, but they are all usable.

In any case, new prints will be made from the originals for the city hall, and as a gesture of thanks for their cooperation, a second set will be made for the Mining Museum. Archival framing for both sets will protect the new prints and allow them to be displayed for years to come.

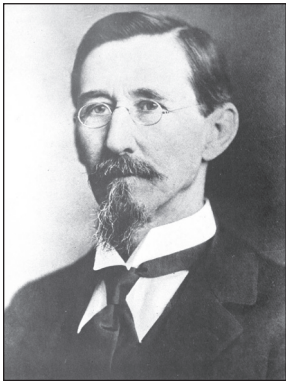
This effort is a project of the Montevallo Historical Society and the prints and framing will be donated to both organizations as a gesture of community improvement.

## Montevallo Mayors From 1900 to the Present

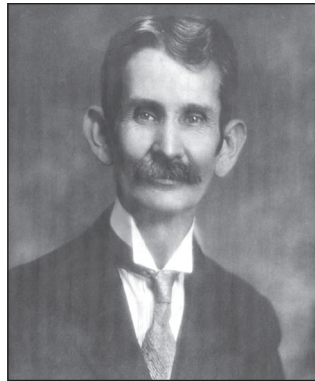
E.S. Lyman ..... 1901-1903  
J.M. Reynolds..... 1903-1904  
H.C. Reynolds..... 1904-1905  
E.S. Lyman ..... 1905-1909  
C.L. Meroney ..... 1909-1910  
L.N. Nabors..... 1910-1912  
J.M. Reynolds..... 1912-1914  
P.J. Kroell..... 1914-1916  
W.H. Lyman..... 1916-1918

E.G. Givhan ..... 1918 - A/O  
L.N. Nabors..... 1918-1920  
J.A. Brown ..... 1920-1924  
R.A. Reid..... 1924-1926  
J.R. Johnson ..... 1926-1932  
J.I. Reid ..... 1932-1934  
E.S. Lyman, Jr. .... 1934-1936  
C.T. Acker..... 1936-1940  
F.P. Givhan ..... 1940-1944

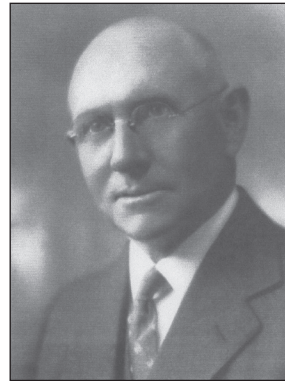
C.G. Sharp..... 1944-1948  
W.M. Wyatt ..... 1948-1966  
M.L. Orr, Jr..... 1966-1972  
Ralph Sears..... 1972-1996  
Grady Parker ..... 1996-2004  
Sharon Anderson..... 2004-2008  
Ben McCrory ..... 2008-2012  
Hollie Cost..... 2012 -



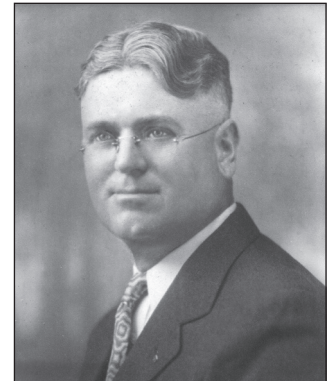
H.C. Reynolds



C.L. Meroney



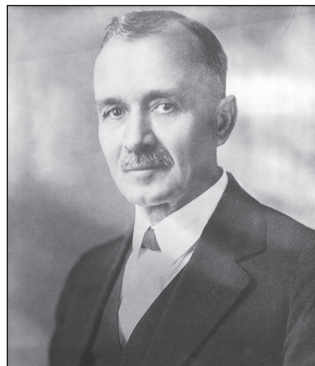
Dr. E.G. Givhan



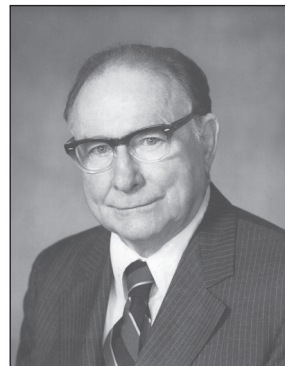
J.A. Brown



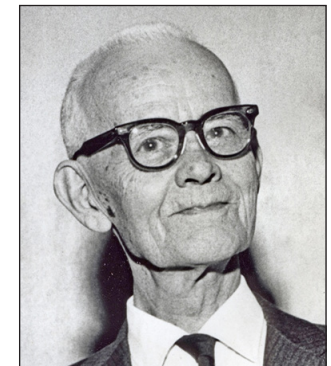
Unknown



E.S. Lyman, Jr.



F.P. Givhan



W.M. Wyatt



Dr. M.L. Orr, Jr.



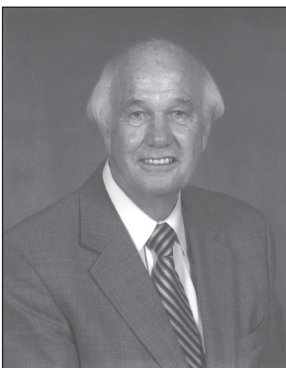
Ralph Sears



Grady Parker



Sharon Anderson



Ben McCrory



Hollie Cost

**The photographs shown here are from the Aldrich Coal Mining Museum Collection. They will be digitally restored, reprinted, and framed for archival preservation.**

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