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Best Evidence of a Flourishing Town

Submitted by Marty Everse

During the Civil War, Henry Lyman and Edward Davis could have been the original odd couple. They came from widely diverse backgrounds but were very successful business partners and close friends. Lyman was from Connecticut and his first ally in the Montevallo mercantile world in the early 1850s was Hiram Butler, another Connecticut transplant. Butler accumulated a fortune but never felt entirely comfortable in the South. Rumors abounded he was a closet abolitionist. By 1860, Butler had fled back north and two years later the Confederate courts declared him an alien enemy, sequestered his property, and sold it at auction. Lyman stayed put and by 1862 was in partnership with Edward Davis, a southern boy, born and bred near Charleston, South Carolina, later moving to Elyton before emerging in Montevallo. Once there, he wed the daughter of Jacob Perry, thus cementing his place in the community. Among their many customers, Lyman & Davis had a lucrative trade with the Confederate government peddling peas, flour, bacon, horse liniment, and plates, cups, bowls, basins and even manufactured and sold niter needed for the production of gunpowder.

Following the war, Lyman & Davis began anew their merchandizing efforts in Montevallo as well as starting a sister firm in Selma on Broad Street. They hung on to the Selma store for about three years before selling out and focusing their sights on an exciting new endeavor in the spring of 1868, the Montevallo Cotton Factory. Located on Shoal Creek near where the concrete dam is today, local papers heralded the factory as the best evidence of a flourishing town and hoped it would prove "the nucleus around which may grow up a large manufacturing business." To produce thread and yarn, the duo purchased 750 spindles from Daniel Pratt of Prattville fame and hired the Englishman, Edward Burns, an experienced textile manager, to run the plant for them. A correspondent for the Mobile Register reported that Montevallo was "quietly setting an example well worthy of emulation by larger and more pretentious places" while noting that the superintendent, Edward Burns, was well known to many Mobilians as the one who put up the machinery for the Dog River Cotton Factory near Mobile in the early 1850s.

The thread and yarn produced by Lyman & Davis were pronounced equal to any made in Alabama, and the factory was kept running day and night to fill the orders that were constantly pouring in. The company employed 13 hands, mostly girls and orphan children of Confederate soldiers. Two of those orphans were Martha and James McGaughy



Now owned by the University of Montevallo and known as the Van Tuyl house, named for a popular philosophy professor, the structure was originally built by Henry Lyman, co-owner of the Montevallo Cotton Factory.

whose father, Samuel, a member of the 44th Alabama Infantry Regiment, died of disease and was buried in a mass grave in Petersburg, Virginia in 1863. *The Selma Times-Argus* marveled at what was happening inside the mill. "It is amusing and interesting to witness the nimble fingers of the fair operatives, as they fly with lightning-like rapidity over work which none but female hands can do so well." The girls and orphans worked cheaply, the entire daily payroll was about \$12, while producing 200-250 pounds of thread worth about \$80 on the market.

Despite the glowing prospects of the Montevallo Cotton Factory, the company fell on hard times when Edward Davis became ill and died in 1869. Shortly after, his wife, Mary Perry Davis, wrote her brother, "since his health failed he has been unable to attend to his business and it has not prospered." By the time of the 1870 census, Lyman & Davis were no longer listed as owners of the mill. The firm had become hopelessly in debt to the Mobile commission merchants Foote & Malone and control of the company passed to them. When a local wag described Montevallo in 1871, he wrote, "We have a Town Council and Calaboose, four churches and two preachers, a fine school with lots of boys and girls, a Tan Yard and Factory (the Factory don't run)." A year later Giles Edwards, a well-known iron master who had previously worked at the Shelby and Brierfield Iron Works, proposed resurrecting the cotton mill on Shoal Creek but the plan fizzled when he moved off to Woodstock, Alabama and began building a blast furnace there. Though forgotten today, the Montevallo Cotton Factory of Lyman and Davis was the first commercial textile mill in Shelby County beating the establishment of Siluria Mills by over 30 years.