

Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY
NEWSLETTER

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"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Fall 2015

From Barton to Yerby: A Look at Some Important Mobile Educators Buried in Magnolia Cemetery

In 1826 Alabama State Representative Willoughby Barton drafted legislation which would give Mobile the state's first public school. Barton did not live to see the Greek revival masterpiece built in 1836 nor would he have any idea that it would be named in his honor.

Willoughby Barton had been widowed in South Carolina before moving to Alabama, and died in Mobile in 1828. His death occurred in August and it is suspected that the cause was yellow fever. Just where Mr. Barton was buried has never been discovered, but his name will always be synonymous with education in a city he called home for barely nine years.

After being abandoned as office space for the school board, Barton Academy is now undergoing a full restoration from the top of its classic dome to the lobby. Plans call for it to become an educational facility once more after decades of neglect.

Three families buried in Magnolia Cemetery would develop strong ties to Barton Academy as well as education for Mobile.

The Barton Annex



Post Card image of the new annex behind Barton Academy. In 1910 this would be named in honor of the late John Yerby. The building has recently completed a long overdue restoration.

(Author's Collection)

By the early years of the 20th century Barton's yearbook, the Bartonian, consistently alluded to the need for a larger facility. Suburban Leinkauf School was opened in 1903 and a year later an annex for Barton Academy was completed with an entrance facing Conti Street. Six years later, that building would receive a new name: The Yerby School.

Sadly no photograph of Mr. Yerby could be found, but his biography well explains why he was selected for this honor.

An August Gentleman

John DuBois Yerby was born in the Black Belt of Alabama in the town of Greensboro in 1860. He obviously took after his father who was both a school teacher and in 1866 superintendent of schools for Hale County. John Yerby graduated from Southern University in Greensboro at the age of 19.

Yerby was first listed in Mobile's 1880 city directory where his position was listed as "Teacher, Boy's Senior Grammar School, Barton Academy" and he was apparently living in a boarding house on St. Anthony Street, west of Jackson Street. Five years later he married a Mobile native, Gabriella Bullock and in 1886 the couple had a daughter, Rosabel.



No photo was found of her parents, but Rosabel Yerby posed for this photograph early in the 20th century.

(The McCall Library/USA Archives)

In 1887 Yerby, at the age of just 27 was listed as "Principal Boy's Senior Grammar School, Barton Academy." Yerby was apparently as popular an administrator as he was a teacher. Within a decade he was named Superintendent.

John and Gabriella Yerby moved frequently leading to the assumption that they were probably renters. Their address varied from St. Michael Street, east of Franklin (1885), to the south west corner of Jackson and St. Louis streets (1888), 368 Congress Street (1892) to a final address of 996 Government Street in 1893. At the time that address was the north east corner of Government and Ann streets which today holds Griffith Service Station.

Interestingly, the offices for the school board were not located in Barton Academy. Until well into the first decade of the 20th century the board met on the upper floor of a commercial building on the north east corner of Dauphin and Royal streets. The floor below housed Spira and Pincus, a leading clothing store for boys and men. And according to the city directories that board met “every second Wednesday.”

Barton was separated into two schools until 1911: one for males, the other for females, with a separate principal for each. As stated, Yerby served as the principal of the male side. The long time female equivalent was Electra Semmes Colston, the widowed daughter of Confederate hero Raphael Semmes. Nearly 80 years ago an article appeared in the Murphy Hi Times recalling a late 19th century tale of Mr. Yerby and Mrs. Colston which gives wonderful insight into the personalities of these two.

Mrs. Electra Semmes Colston

All was quiet in the Barton auditorium. Mrs. Colston was making a speech to the assembled school, in a cultured, dignified voice. Discipline fairly radiated from her person; so did dignity. Mrs. Colston did not see Superintendent Yerby slip onto the stage behind her and slowly lower himself into her empty chair. Nor did she see the kittenish man wink at the delighted audience. While the students watched with eager eyes, the plump lady walked backwards to her chair and sat down heavily – upon the waiting lap of Mr. Yerby.

The students howled with glee at the enchanting sight of Mrs. Colston sitting on the lap of the august gentleman. Perhaps Mrs. Colston had ironclad principles, or she may have found the lap of Mr. Yerby uncomfortable. At any rate she did not remain on Mr. Yerby's lap. And the entire school paid for the insult to her dignity. She kept the whole school in after school for an hour every day for a week, while Mr. Yerby went merrily on his way, unpunished, or so says legend.

An Agonizing Departure

On August 9, 1900, the “kittenish man” who had delighted an auditorium full of Barton students, died an agonizing death. According to a newspaper account he had awoken with “a severe pain in the temple which he thought was neuralgia.” The pain worsened and a second physician was called but neither doctor could stop his suffering. “Professor Yerby lapsed into unconsciousness shortly before his death.” He was only 40 years old.

John Yerby's funeral was conducted out of the family's Government Street home, and the Register devoted several columns to his life and that event. “No man was better beloved

by the children whom he taught than Professor Yerby. He was in love with his profession and by his energy and executive ability he has brought the schools up to a high degree of efficiency. His work in and for the public schools in Mobile is his monument and his name will live long in the hearts and memories of those with whom he has been associated.”

The funeral cortege traveled across Government Street and down Ann Street to the cemetery. There Masonic rites were conducted as well as what the newspaper termed “the Pythian ritual.” As the benediction was said, “the vault was closed and the stone slab covered with beautiful flowers which had been sent by the sorrowing friends, among whom the most noticeable emblems being those from the school board and the Knights of Pythias.”



John and Gabriella Yerby are the only occupants of the Yerby lot. Rosabel's final resting place is at present unknown.

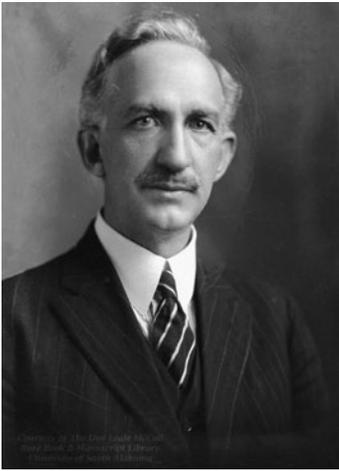
Gabriella Yerby died in 1909 and did not live to see the Barton Annex renamed to honor her late husband. Rosabel Yerby followed in her father's and grandfather's footsteps and became a teacher at Leinkauf and later the Raphael Semmes School on Spring Hill Avenue, east of Ann Street.

In 1914, Rosabel married Vaiden McIlwain of Choctaw County and where she ended up has not been discovered. The Yerby lot at Magnolia Cemetery is rather barren today and holds only her parents beneath a pair of stone slabs –one of which was once covered with floral tributes to a beloved educator.

Samuel S. Murphy

Mobile's next superintendent of schools was also a Black Belt native. Samuel Silenus Murphy, Jr. was born in Pleasant Ridge in Greene County in 1867. His father had left medical school at what is now Tulane, to go into the drug business with his brother and later operated a general store in Pleasant Ridge. In 1870, at the age of 45, Murphy returned to the Medical College of Alabama in Mobile and completed his degree.

The senior Murphy had his medical practice in Pleasant Ridge. Sam, Jr. was the second of four sons. He was sent to Tuscaloosa where he attended Verner Military Academy before graduating from the University of Alabama in June of 1890. The following year he arrived in Mobile and is listed in the Mobile city



*Samuel Silenus Murphy, Jr.
whose name has been
synonymous with education in
Mobile for over a century.*

(The McCall Library/USA Archives)

directory as “Teacher Boy’s Senior Grammar School, Barton,” and residing on the north side of Dauphin Street opposite the head of Common Street.

Murphy was obviously a popular teacher and by the 1895 directory he was listed as “1st Assistant, Barton” and by 1899 as “Principal.” In December of 1899 he married Marie Marechal of Mobile, whose father had been a classmate of Dr. Murphy’s at the medical college. Her family also had a strong link to Mobile’s educational system.

The Marechal Connection

Marie’s paternal grandfather, Charles Marechal, had been born in France. After serving in the army in Algiers he made his way to the United States, landing at New Orleans in 1840. After teaching “Modern Languages” in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, he arrived in Mobile in 1854 to teach at Barton.

Her father, Edwin Lesley Marechal, had been born in Pennsylvania in 1850 and graduated with Samuel S. Murphy, Sr. from the Medical College of Alabama in 1870. He started his medical practice in Stockton but reportedly due to health issues moved to Meridian, Miss. where he became involved in the newspaper business. It was here in 1874 that he married Julia Greer, a native of Sumter County, Ala.

By the 1880’s Marechal had returned to the field of medicine and Alabama, with a practice in Stockton where he also served as the county’s health officer. Marechal also founded the Baldwin County Medical Association in 1886.

Marechal moved his family to Mobile by 1890 where he joined the staff of the medical school and became president of the Medical Society



Dr. Edwin Lesley Marechal, Mobile physician and a long-time member of the school board. Two of his daughters would marry Samuel Murphy.

(Author’s Collection)

of Mobile County in 1895. A year earlier he had been elected to the school board and would twice serve as its president. In that capacity, Marechal would have known both John Yerby and Samuel Murphy very well.

Mobile’s New Superintendent of Schools

In September of 1900 with the untimely death of John Yerby, Samuel Silenus Murphy, Jr. was appointed Mobile’s school superintendent at the age of 33. He moved into Yerby’s former office at what was then numbered 78 Dauphin Street and city directories indicate his residence was at 13 South Georgia Avenue, an address which would ultimately vanish with the expansions of Dauphin Way Baptist Church.

In June 1902 the Murphys were living in a house on the north side of Government Street opposite Rapier Street when their only daughter, Marie, was born. Just what became of this house is unclear. The address vanishes from Mobile’s city directories after 1911 and the lot sat vacant for decades until filled by what is now known as the Bay Haas Building. Three year old Marie lost her 29 year old mother in 1905.

The Second Mrs. Murphy

City directories indicate that Sam Murphy and his young daughter left Government Street by 1906 and moved in with his in-laws. And, in 1909 Sam Murphy married his 24 year old sister-in-law, Edith.



Edith Marechal Murphy had a remarkable teaching career and lived to the age of 94.

Edith Marechal had been born in 1885, and was a 1906 graduate of Sophie Newcomb College. She returned to Mobile after graduation and taught mathematics at Barton Academy until her marriage. Edith and Sam Murphy had two sons: Samuel, III, and Greer.

Mobile’s 1909 city directory for Mobile indicates that Murphy’s office as school board superintendent had moved from Dauphin and Royal streets into Barton Academy. And that was also the year he lost his father in law.

On August 19, 1909, Dr. Marechal died at the age of 59. The Register editorialized “Mobile lost a citizen whose mature years were devoted in large measure to the public interest, a loyal and true friend, a man who was original in thought, strong in action, honest of purpose and useful in diverse ways. Dr. Marechal will be best remembered for his long and able work as a member and president of the school board. He was progressive in his ideas and did much to elevate the standard of education in this county.”

His funeral took place at his home at 954 Palmetto Street and the funeral cortege headed to Magnolia Cemetery for the burial.

School Construction Boom

Under Samuel Murphy's direction the number of public schools in Mobile grew rapidly. As previously mentioned, both Leinkauf School and the Annex to Barton Academy were completed by 1904, followed by four in 1910: the Russell School on Broad Street, Oakdale School on South Washington Avenue, W. H. Council on Dearborn Street and the Raphael Semmes School on Spring Hill Avenue. As Mobile's population spread westward, the Old Shell Road School was added in 1915.

Although Barton had been enlarged in 1904 within five years its yearbook staff editorialized "We wish to register a demand for a new high school building as soon as the city or county can see its way clear to issue bonds for such a purpose. With the Panama Canal will come an era of wealth and prosperity for which we wish to be prepared. Take up the matter ye Alumni, and let the cry be on every lip: "A NEW HIGH SCHOOL."



Mobilians had been clamoring for a modern high school since the start of the century. In 1925 they got their wish. Here it is under construction. It would not be renamed for Murphy until two years after its 1926 opening.

(The McCall Library/USA Archives)

Sam Murphy would have certainly been aware of that plea but it would not become a reality until well past the world war which was about to burst in Europe. It was then determined to build a high school large enough to handle the entire county as had been done in both Montgomery and Birmingham. The cornerstone was laid in December of 1925 and the new Mobile County High School opened the following year. The six buildings had cost more than \$850,000 and with the planned addition of a gymnasium and indoor pool the cost would allow Mobilians to point with pride to "Mobile's Million Dollar High School."

Samuel Murphy's pride in that facility was short lived. His health began to fail about the time that cornerstone was laid and he would not live to see it fully completed. Samuel Murphy died on the morning of November 4, 1926 at the age of 59. The lead editorial in the Register the next day lamented: "No citizen of Mobile has played a more enduringly useful part in the life of this city and county than Mr. Samuel S. Murphy. For more than a quarter of a century Mr. Murphy has labored

with faithfulness and ability for the cause of education. The million dollar high school is in part at least a monument to Mr. Murphy's devotion to the cause of education."

A City in Mourning

Murphy's funeral was held at Government Street Presbyterian Church where crowds packed the sanctuary. City Hall was closed for the occasion and flags were lowered to half-mast. Among the 32 honorary pallbearers and six active were the members of the school board and officers of the Rotary Club with names like Bedsole, Cochrane, Ladd, Pillans, Inge, Rain and Davidson.

As the funeral cortege left the church and headed to Magnolia Cemetery the crowd was treated to the sight of hundreds of school children lining the way as an honor guard. Murphy was buried in the Marechal-Murphy lot. Ironically, the Yerby lot is within view.



The Marechal-Murphy lot at Magnolia Cemetery.

Murphy was survived by his wife, Edith who returned to teaching. She would spend 30 years in that profession within the walls of the high school named to honor her late husband in 1928. In 1957 she left Murphy to teach at the newly remodeled Julius T. Wright School for Girls on Dauphin Street, retiring in 1961. She died in 1979 at the age of 94.

Samuel Murphy had been survived by 3 children. His daughter, Marie, married J. Will Goodloe, who would become president of Mobile's Title Insurance Company. In November of 1954 as she paused in the median of Government Street to reach a wedding reception at the Mobile Woman's Club, an eastbound car apparently crossed the line and struck her sending her into the path of a west bound vehicle. Her tragic death took place within site of the address where she had been born 52 years earlier. Unlike the rest of the family she rests in Pinecrest Cemetery.

Samuel Murphy's namesake was a physician in Mobile until his death in 1973, while his younger son, Greer Murphy practiced law in the Washington, D. C. area. He died in 1992 and is buried beside his parents and brother in the Marechal Murphy lot.

- Tom McGehee



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Since the last issue a number of things have happened:

- *We note with sadness the passing of the founder of the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery, Emily Townsend Miller on September 10, 2015. Besides founding this organization Mrs. Miller helped start the History Museum of Mobile and their Friends organization. She even blocked the proposed demolition of City Hall which now houses that museum. She was rightly recognized for her efforts when she was named Preservationist of Distinction by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society in 2006.*
- *In July we also lost a long time board member and supporter of the Friends: Flossie Greaves Leatherbury (Mrs. Gregory L.). Both the Miller and Leatherbury families suggested memorials in their memory be made to the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery, for which the board certainly thanks them.*
- *On a happier note, the gap is gone. With partial funding from the Friends, the main portion of the cemetery is now entirely enclosed by a handsome iron fence. Gone is the dilapidated and rusting chain link which was an eyesore and did little to protect the cemetery.*

- *And thanks to another generous grant from the Ben May Trust, the long missing fence which once enclosed the historic Old Hebrew Cemetery within Magnolia Cemetery is being replicated.*
- *Please note the upcoming November Saturday tours of the cemetery and take advantage of the fall weather while learning about our funerary art and some of our notable permanent residents.*
- *And finally, I hope you have received your renewal letter for membership in the Friends and have sent in your check. None of what has been accomplished by the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery would be possible without your support. Please also consider giving a gift membership with Christmas approaching. They don't need to be interested in cemeteries – just in learning some history of some interesting Mobilians they are not likely to find elsewhere.*

*Tom McGehee
President*

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2. In Memory of Sophia Hunter Ethier by Raymond Ethier.
3. In Memory of Billy James Walker by the Billy James Walker Trust.
 4. A Gift of the A.S. Mitchell Foundation
 5. A Gift of the Hearin Chandler Foundation
6. In Honor of Douglas Burtu Kearley for his past presidency of the Friends.

Annual Cemetery Tours

Once again H. F. "Tige" Marston with the able assistance of Janet Savage will be offering walking tours of Magnolia Cemetery. According to Tige the three Saturday morning tours will last approximately two hours, beginning promptly at 10:00 A.M. and concluding by Noon.

The 2015 schedule is as follows:

1. Saturday, November 7th: "Burial Customs and Victorian Funerary Traditions.
2. Saturday, November 14th: "Historic Gravesites in Magnolia Cemetery."
3. Saturday, November 21st: "Victorian Funerary Art and Its Symbolism."

While tours are free of charge, the group size is limited making advance reservations mandatory. Please call (251) 208-7303 or (251) 432-8672 to make your reservation as soon as possible. The tours are popular and often fill early!

