

# MAGNOLIA MESSENGER



The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery

*"Remove not the ancient Landmark"*

Spring 2012

## The Burke Family – from Tobacco to Riverboats

### The Tobacconists

At the start of the twentieth century cigars were seemingly everywhere in Mobile. Nearly a dozen cigar manufacturing plants were churning out brands honoring such local landmarks as "Monroe Park" and "Fidelia Club." Other popular brands focused on more general topics with names such as "La Belle Venice," "Golden Feathers," and "Frances."

Frohlichstein Cigar Manufacturing, founded in 1878 was producing an astounding 3 million hand rolled cigars a year by 1900 in their plant on Water Street. So strong was the cigar industry in Mobile that Jerome Sheip, Inc. was founded with the sole intent to produce lumber for cigar boxes.

Cigar stores were a fixture all over town. Every hotel boasted a cigar stand and there was even a post card image of the one in the Cawthon Hotel. At the intersection of Dauphin and Royal Streets two tobacco stores were in full swing by the late teens: United Cigar on the north east corner, and the firm of C. Burke Cigar Dealers on the north west corner.



*Peter Burke*

*(1846-1909) Cigar store owner, Mobile County Sheriff and later Chief of Police, had been a member of the Can't Get Away Club since the 1860's. This photo was taken of the leaders of that club which comprised Mobilians who refused to flee yellow fever epidemics.*

Three members of the Burke family were involved in selling cigars. As early as 1867 Peter Burke was listed in the Mobile city directory where his occupation was given as a clerk in the cigar store of M. D. Grinnell on the corner of Dauphin and Commerce streets. Grinnell, who was also Mobile's sheriff, vanished from the directories within two years and Peter Burke was listed as proprietor of the cigar store in 1870.

### The Finnegan Connection

In 1870, Peter was married to Margaret (Maggie) Finnegan, daughter of riverboat captain Owen Finnegan. Captain Finnegan, an Irish immigrant, had been plying the waters of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama since 1836. He had watched his Henry J. King get doused

with turpentine and set afire by federal troops but was able to recover in the years after the war and had command of the Mary and the Maggie F. Burke among many others. No one ever came close to his record of owning and commanding more of the floating palaces that once traveled Alabama's rivers.

City directories place the Finnegan household at the south west corner of Government and Bayou streets. The 1872 city directory indicates that the house was also occupied by Peter and Maggie Burke.

### Christopher Burke

While the 1872 directory indicated that Peter's brother, Christopher, was working as a clerk in his tobacco shop, he was on his own by 1874. Christopher had ambitiously built the new Burke Building on the north west corner of Royal and Dauphin streets, opposite Van Antwerp's Drug Store. His cigar shop occupied a portion of the first floor of what was a three story Italianate structure.

In 1875 Chris Burke married Emma Turner and the couple lived on Conti Street, east of Claiborne before venturing out to Dauphin Way in 1880. His address was then listed as "SS Dauphin Way, 5 West of Ann." The couple would have five sons and three daughters.

Five years later his brother and the Finnegans had moved across Government Street to the north west corner of Government and Scott streets. Later numbered as 750, the site held a two story brick residence with cast iron galleries. The Sanborn Fire Map shows it to have occupied a double lot.

When Peter Burke started out in the tobacco business he was clerking for M. D. Grinnell who was Mobile County Sheriff in 1867. In 1883, Burke, like Grinnell was operating a tobacco business and serving as Mobile County Sheriff.



*The Burke Building at the north west corner of Dauphin and Royal Streets was built in 1874 by Christopher Burke, Peter's brother. The lower floor would house his tobacco and cigar emporium for some 50 years.*

Peter Burke's last foray into tobacco seems to have been in 1894 when his profession was listed as "Mgr., Lion Cigar Factory." That entity was given an address of 23 South Water Street, but only appears in the 1894 directory. Chris Burke remained in the tobacco business. His brother apparently did not for he is listed as Chief of Police in 1896 and "Mgr., Detective Agency" in 1899.

Tragically, Christopher Burke died at age 56 on Christmas Eve, 1900. His death was attributed to "complications" arising from a "carbuncle." His funeral was held from St. Mary's Catholic Church and honorary pallbearers included W. H. Leinkauf, James McPhillips, John L. Rappier and Hannis Taylor.

### The Next Generation

Within a year, twenty six year old Jesse T. Burke was operating his father's Dauphin Street cigar store and he briefly added a second location on the west side of Royal two doors north of Government Street. His residence was given as that of his widowed mother in Dauphin Way.

Meanwhile, Peter and Maggie Burke and her father had returned to the south east corner of Government and South Bayou Street in the house they had previously occupied. In 1909, Maggie Burke lost her father and husband, just months apart.

Captain Finnegan lived to the age of 89 and was buried in Magnolia Cemetery. His son in law, Peter Burke, died in October at the age of 63. His death rated a newspaper editorial which noted that he had been one of the oldest surviving members of the Can't Get

Away Club and had assisted in every epidemic since the late 1860's. He was described as "A loving husband, a gentle, kind parent and the possessor of manly qualities which endeared him to those who knew him best."

Peter Burke's funeral was held at 757 Government Street followed by a service at the Cathedral. His honorary pallbearers included attorney Gregory L. Smith,



*Peter Burke occupied this house at the north west corner of Government and Scott streets, along with his wife, Maggie, and her parents, Owen and Margaret Finnegan. In the mid-twenties it became Higgins and Courtney, a funeral home and was eventually lost for a gas station. A fried chicken franchise occupies the corner today.*

postmaster P. D. Barker, department store owner Leopold Hammel and Mayor Pat Lyons. The newspaper noted that "the funeral cortege (was) one of the longest seen in Mobile in many months."

### The Cigar Business

As the century progressed, cigar consumption continued to soar. In 1912, Jesse Burke and his wife Nellie, hired the architectural firm of Hutchisson and Denham

to design their home at 1835 Dauphin Street. The result was a two story neo-classic showplace with monumental porticoes facing both Dauphin and Carlen streets.

Two years later Burke was afforded the honor of being one of the charter members of the Rotary Club of Mobile. Among those joining him in the effort were Walter Bellingrath, Albert P. Bush, Harry Hartwell, Gregory Luce, Palmer Pillans and James Van Antwerp.

In 1918 the cigar business in America began to change.



*By the 1930's the Burke Building had lost its third floor to a fire and the popularity of cigars had plunged. Here it houses a men's hat store. In recent years a cast iron gallery has been put back onto the structure.*

That was the year that the first national brands of cigars were introduced under the names White Owl, William Penn and Robert Burns by the General Cigar Company. National chain cigar stores popped up all over the country.

And then the luxury of hand-rolled cigars began to be questioned. Machine rolled cigars were cheaper to produce and ad campaigns began asking "Why run the risk of cigars made by dirty yellowed fingers and dipped in spit?" Hand rolled cigars began to disappear and so did many of the old time cigar stands.

Cigar sales would hit an all time high in 1920 with 8.5 billion cigars sold. But then the decline started. Chewing tobacco had been a big seller in cigar stores but was now increasingly frowned upon. Hollywood

depicted chewing and spitting to be confined to rubes and hayseeds.

Americans were flocking to the movies in droves and those stars – male and female – increasingly smoked cigarettes. Prohibition put an end to the male enclave of the saloon with its cigars and spittoons. Suddenly both sexes were drinking and smoking cigarettes to-



*Jesse T. Burke, a son of Christopher Burke, built this impressive Dauphin Street home in 1912. He would enjoy it little more than a decade before leaving Mobile.*

gether in speakeasies.

Along with prohibition came gangsters and Hollywood forever linked them with cigars. Suddenly the once prized cigar was vilified and their sales took a downward spiral.

In the 1920's Jesse T. Burke vanished from Mobile's city directory. The 1930 census revealed that he had moved to Atlanta where his occupation was given as "salesman."

In 1942 Jesse Burke had returned to Mobile and after what the newspaper described as a lengthy illness died at his son's home. He was 67 years old.

By the time Mr. Burke was taken to Magnolia Cemetery, his father's shop on Dauphin and Royal streets had been converted into a men's hat shop. His com-

petitor across the street had also disappeared. A shoe store was in its place.

Today the Burke Building still stands. A fire long ago took its third story but the iron galleries have returned



*The Finnegan-Burke Lot at Magnolia Cemetery.*

and the structure houses a law firm. And further out Dauphin Street Jesse Burke's house has now survived a century despite a fire and long periods of vacancy. Once again a private residence, its white columns continue to dominate the corner of Carlen Street.

Tom McGehee

*Please*  
*Don't forget your Friends!*  
**Renew Your Membership Today**  
**THANKS!**

**(We regret that as a non-profit agency we cannot afford to send newsletters if your membership has expired.)**

## President's Message

### Spring Tours of Mansions and Magnolia

Mobile's winter is halfway over and so spring can't be too far away. As the azaleas burst amid the milder temperatures, it is once again time to plan for the annual Historic Mobile Homes Tour which will take place the weekend of March 16, 2012. Last year Magnolia Cemetery was featured on the schedule of Friday events and was toured by dozens of visitors. This year we have been asked to repeat the tour but please note that it will take place on Saturday, March 17.

Plan on a walking tour of our historic cemetery and learn about its outstanding funerary art and Victorian symbolism. There will be plenty of stories to tell of some of the thousands of Mobilians buried here. We hope that a Saturday date will allow more to attend this enjoyable event.

The Historic Homes Tour benefits the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, and will focus on the great houses of DeTonti Square on both Friday and Saturday. The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery was founded by members of HMPS and the boards have had a good working relationship for many years.

### January is Election Month

Please take a note of our new officers and board members who will take office in January. We continue to be blessed with talented individuals who donate their time to this organization and I hope you will thank them as your paths cross. Many thanks to Tom Van Antwerp for once again chairing the nominating committee! Douglas Kearley has a long association with this organization and will be an excellent president.

My term as president is ending and I will be rotating off the board. It has been a pleasure serving as president of the Friends but we really could not function if it was not for our members and the talents of our executive director, Janet Savage, and our superintendent Mark Halseth and his staff. They take great pride in this organization and in this historic place, and it always shows.

Tom McGehee

## Q & A by

### H. F. "Tige" Marston Cemetery Specialist, City of Mobile

Q. When can I take a guided tour of Magnolia?

A: We have been conducting public tours of Magnolia for many years. Beginning in 2011 we set November aside as "Municipal Cemetery Month". We had four public tours of Magnolia in November of 2011. The plan is to expand the programs in future Novembers. But we have a small dilemma with our cemetery tours. Attendance at last year's tours was fairly good, but quite low compared to the number of inquiries we receive throughout the year requesting tour information. While we will be expanding our advertising efforts in the future, it is not necessary to wait for a public tour announcement.

Groups of 10-25 may call my office anytime and schedule a guided tour. I conduct group tours from October 1st through March 1st. Tours are wonderful in the fall and winter, without the heat, the humidity, the mosquitoes and the other hazards of hot weather. Most tours are with organized groups, but large family groups or even a group of friends are more than welcome.

Call me with two weeks notice at (251) 208-7307 to reserve a tour date; and spread the word to family and friends. We want everyone to experience the art, history and mystery of Magnolia Cemetery!

## Grave Spaces for Sale

At the present time there are only cremation spaces available for sale within Square 29. Please call our office for further information.

### Memorial Fence Sections

<i>Donor</i>	<i>In Honor or In Memory of</i>
Mr. & Mrs. William Blacksher Lott, Jr. Mr. & Mrs. Walter Graves Petty, Jr.	In Memory of Virginia McWherter Lott
Goodbrad Irons Works Mrs. W. H. Thompson	In Memory of W. H. Thompson, Jr.
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Matilda Pope White Trust	In Memory of Matilda Pope White William Pope White Margaret Pratt Abbot
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Raymond H. Ethier Trust	In Memory of Sophia Hunter Ethier
The Alletta Turner Trust	In Honor of Thomas Crichton McGehee

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**CLIP AND RETURN THIS FORM TO**  
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 (251) 432-8672

- Please find enclosed my tax-deductible membership contribution of \$35.
- I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery.
- I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Peperual Care Trust Fund.
- Renewal     I am a new member.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Square \_\_\_\_\_ Lot No. \_\_\_\_\_

- Please contact me to work on volunteer projects.

## Memorials and Honrariums

### *In Honor of... Given By...*

Emily T. Miller  
on the 25th Anniversary  
of the Friends of Magnolia

Rev. Ryan & Mrs. Laura Jensen  
Mr. & Mrs. Ronald A. Snider  
Susan R. Miller & Family

Margaret Dowling Hillard  
on your birthday

Stella Hillard Moore

### *In Memory of... Given By...*

Agnes Bancroft

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Officers, Director and Staff  
the Friends of Magnolia Cemetery

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Billy Walker & Marguriete W. Gabriel  
Friedman's Fine Jewelry  
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