

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Newsletter

August 2021

CELEBRATING BIRMINGHAM: THE CITY BEAUTIFUL AND GEORGE B. WARD, ITS CHAMPION

The newest volume from the Birmingham Historical Society bears the apt title *Birmingham: The City Beautiful, Compliments of G. Ward*. And in its 112 pages, laced with photos of both George B. Ward (1867-1940) and the growing city he so adored, the story of early Birmingham unfolds like a novel. From George arriving in 1871 in yet-to-be-named Birmingham at the age of 4 to his ascent to city leader, the book draws the reader page to page, improvement by improvement—especially detailing Ward’s determination to beautify the city that benefited greatly from his measures.

Ward—who during his time served as Alderman, Mayor, City Commission President—unwittingly assisted the writing of this volume by keeping news clippings and correspondence in 24 bursting-to-seams scrapbooks now housed in the Birmingham Public Library’s Department of Archives and Manuscripts. Newspaper accounts beyond his personal collection reveal the spirit of this man who shrewdly chose to first recruit women and children to the beautification notion.

Then-Mayor Ward’s little pamphlet of June 1908 (*reproduced on the book’s cover and in its title*) made beautification simple with suggestions for “block improvement societies” such as: “Whitewash everything you can’t paint,” “Wherever the ground shows bare, plant something green in it,” and “Report anybody who militates or ties a horse to a tree. You get half the fine on conviction.” “For permanent screens [to block unsightly views], use hardy shrubs, or the quickly growing vines.” Most of all Ward entreated the ladies to “call all you meet to the idea of a ‘City Beautiful.’”

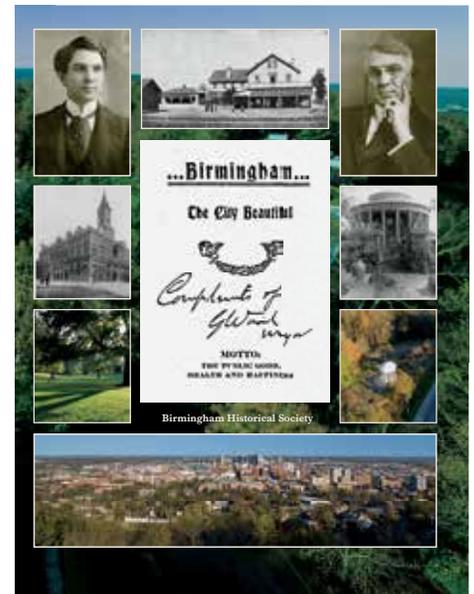
As the story continues, triumphant and true, the Birmingham Beautiful initiative, fueled by Mayor Ward’s energy, worked.

Newspapers of the era reported planting tips from local florists (the period’s horticultural experts) while city schools engaged children in thinking, writing, and talking about the program’s potential. A headquarters office in City Hall, bombarded with inquiries from other cities, worked to spread the beautification message.

What came from the years of Birmingham’s Beautiful boom were parks we enjoy today: Ward, Phelan, North Birmingham, the pocket parks along Highland Avenue, Lane (which now houses Birmingham Botanical Gardens and the Birmingham Zoo), and Linn, the latter surrounded by public buildings, forming a city center, a prime City Beautiful era project.

What also emerged, improving health conditions that went beyond beauty, were sanctions on sewers, waste disposal, and a “War on Mosquitoes,” which helped squelch the spread of yellow fever, malaria, dengue, and encephalitis by disease-borne insects. A \$5 fine was imposed on any resident not emptying rain barrels and wash tubs of standing water daily. Mayor Ward was serious; the people listened.

George Ward’s vision for the City Beautiful movement, inspired by the great “White City” created for the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, was to create “a living urban environment . . . healthy and happy to live in.” He championed the movement long after leaving office in 1917, executing his learning from nationally prominent landscape designer Warren H. Manning (who had himself worked on the World’s Fair project). Ward never strayed far from his visions or opinions, even as he spent 40 years as an investment banker, founding the firm of Ward, Sterne & Company (later Sterne, Agee & Leach and today part of 1919 Investment Counsel, Inc.) specializing in Alabama public and corporate finance and



securities. The Sterne Agee Charitable Foundation, in fact, commissioned this book to honor its founder and his achievements.

Indeed, the name George B. Ward should live on. George H. Eustis, a contemporary who served as Birmingham treasurer, described Ward as “competent, untiring, energetic, and wedded to his work. He never dodged responsibilities or sidetracked an issue. He cleaned this town up to the queen’s taste...[getting] the ladies of the city interested in a ‘city beautiful’ movement.”

Researched and written by the Birmingham Historical Society, *Birmingham: The City Beautiful, Compliments of G. Ward* will be available November 1 from Birmingham Historical Society, One Sloss Quarters, Birmingham, AL 35222 for \$24.95 (\$30 postpaid), from Amazon, and from Shoppe at 3815 Clairmont Avenue South. One copy of the book will be provided gratis to 2021 members.

Carolanne Roberts

CELEBRATING BIRMINGHAM'S 150TH ANNIVERSARY

Thomas McAdory Owen's account of the founding of Birmingham published in 1921 at the city's 50th Anniversary, provides a succinct account of the circumstances that led to our city's debut. A prolific writer, Owen was also a lawyer, archivist, historian, and the founder and first director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, established in 1901 as the nation's first publicly funded archive. Owen's widow Marie Bankhead Owen published this essay in his four-volume history of Alabama and succeeded her husband as director of the state archives.

BIRMINGHAM. The City of Birmingham was founded in 1871, by an association of businessmen and financiers, of whom Josiah Morris, of Montgomery, was the leader. The site was near the village of Elyton and at the site where the Alabama & Chattanooga Railroad [Alabama Great Southern Railroad, now Norfolk Southern] between Chattanooga and Meridian, Miss. crosses the South & North Alabama Railroad [Louisville and Nashville Railroad, now CSX]. The occasion for the establishment of a city there was the mineral resources of the vicinity, which centered in the neighborhood of the place selected for the railroad crossing mentioned: but until transportation facilities were provided by the coming of railroads, little or nothing could be done toward developing the natural wealth of the country, however great it might be. Thus the founding and the striking growth of the State's industrial center have been determined by the location of extensive mineral deposits and the provisions of adequate transportation for raw materials and finished products.

Topography and Geology. Birmingham is situated in the east-central part of Jefferson County, in Jones Valley, and in the midst of the most extensive mineral district of the State. The valley was once a mountain and is wholly due to erosion, having been cut out of the mountain-top by the action of the water. Thus it presents the unusual spectacle of a valley which is a water-divide. The streams that rise within the limit flow some to the east and some to the west. None flows for any considerable distance within the valley before breaking through its rocky rim to the rugged country outside. The floor of the valley for most of its length is higher than the mountainous country surrounding it, and its raised edges or rims of millstone grit are the highest points of the locality. These facts cause the site and surrounding of the city to be exceedingly picturesque, and also have a marked influence on its climate. Some of the most attractive residential sections are in the more rolling parts of the city and its suburbs.

The geological formations represented in the valley are the Carboniferous or Coal Measures, Devonian or black shale, and the Silurian. The first-named group contains the coal seams; and the last-named, the iron ores and fluxing materials. Nowhere else in the State, nor in the United States, are the three essentials to the manufacture of iron and steel, coal, iron ore and limestone present in such close proximity and in practically unlimited quantity.

This fortunate circumstance has enabled the manufacturers of the Birmingham district to make iron and steel more cheaply than others, and, as a result, practically control the market-price.

Elyton Land Co. The plan for developing an industrial city in the heart of the mineral district originated with John T. Milner, the engineer [who located the route] for the South & North Alabama Railroad. The financing of the town-building scheme was handled by Josiah Morris, a friend and business associate of Milner, who purchased about 4,000 acres of land in what is the central part of the present city in 1870, paying \$100,000, or approximately \$25 an acre, for it. In 1871 he and several associates, among whom were James R. Powell, Sam Tate, Campbell Wallace, H. M. Caldwell, Bolling Hall, J. N. Gilmer, B. P. Worthington, W. F. Nabers, and William S. Mudd, incorporated the Elyton Land Co. [on December 20, 1870], capitalized at \$200,000, for "the buying lands and selling lots with the view to the location, laying off and effecting the building of a city at or near the town of Elyton . . ." James R. Powell was president. The land in Jones Valley purchased by Mr. Morris was transferred to the company at a valuation of \$200,000 and this constituted the capital stock, which was divided into 2,000 shares. . . .

The name of Birmingham was then suggested and adopted and the principal industrial center of the State, and of the South, which then existed only in the imagination of its promoters was named for the seat of iron manufacture in England.

Soon after the organization of the company, a few land sales were made, and the building of the town had been started. . . .

Incorporation. The "city" of Birmingham was incorporated by the legislature, December 19, 1871. The charter declared that "all the territory within three thousand feet of the Alabama & Chattanooga Railroad, on each side of the same extending from 26th street in said city to the eastern boundary of the city of Elyton, is hereby declared to be within the limits of said corporation." An unusual feature of the charter was the provision that the mayor and seven aldermen should be appointed by the governor instead of being elected by the people of the city. This provision was put into the act of incorporation, it is said, to prevent the control of municipal affairs from getting into the hands of the reckless and undesirable element which predominated at that time among the town's inhabitants. . . .

The first mayor was Robert H. Henley, who was appointed by Gov. Robert B. Lindsay, and took office, December 21, 1871. The first board of aldermen was composed of James B. Francis, B. F. Roden, W. J. McDonald, A. Marre, J. B. Webb, John A. Milner, and T. S. Woods.

Thomas McAdory Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*, Vol. 1, pp. 140-141.

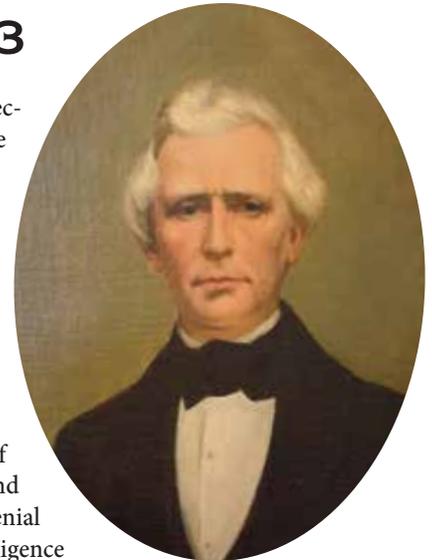
“THIS MAGIC LITTLE CITY” OF 1873

Col. James R. Powell, President of the Elyton Land Company, incorporated December 20, 1870, and known as the “Duke of Birmingham,” was a successful businessman, operator of stagecoach lines across Alabama, cotton farmer, Mayor of Birmingham, and the city’s foremost early advocate. His rhetoric in describing the possibilities for the region’s future growth is unparalleled.

On February 29, 1873, a little more than a year after the incorporation of the city, Col. Powell reported to the Southern investors and stockholders of the Elyton Land Company on the progress of city building under his leadership. Birmingham boasted two railroads, 250 brick and frame houses and stores, a population of 4,000, and a flurry of investment in mineral properties. With typical optimism and rhetorical flourish Powell concluded:

“In conclusion, allow me to congratulate you. . . ; this magic little city of ours has no peer in the rapidity of its growth, combined with the character of its

population and buildings. While other sections of the state, and of almost the entire South, have been oppressed by calamities, political and financial consequent upon the late war—our section, its healthful climate cheering the invalid—its fertile valleys tempting the agriculturalist and its pregnant mountains groaning to be delivered of their wealth, our favored section, the El-Dorado of iron-masters, soon to be penetrated by railroads from every point of the compass, invites with open arms and with full capacity to entertain as congenial spirits—skilled labor, capital, and intelligence from every portion of the globe, affording opportunities and facilities to all to exercise their functions and endowments in their most agreeable vocations.”



Col. James R. Powell.
Oil on canvas with gilded frame, 25” x 31.5” framed oval, painted from a porcelain miniature, 1920-1930. Gift to Birmingham Historical Society by Powell’s great granddaughter Kerry Spearman of Darien, Connecticut, 2020. The canvas backing includes the following painted inscription: “Oil Portrait of James R. Powell Duke of Birmingham First President of the Elyton Land Company Born 1814 Died 1883 Presented by His Daughter Mary Powell Crain [Crane].”

Provenance of the Society’s Powell Portrait

The Birmingham Historical Society portrait is one of three similar portraits commissioned by Mary J. Powell Crane for herself and her two daughters: Katherine Elise Crane and Estelle Burnet Crane. Mary Crane’s version of the portrait is now in the collection of the Birmingham Public Library and hangs in the Department of Archives and Manuscripts. It does not have a canvas backing nor a rear inscription. The Birmingham Historical Society portrait was originally gifted to Estelle Crane and came into the possession of her niece Kerry Spearman of Darien, Connecticut, who retains the portrait gifted to her mother Katherine Elise Crane. Kerry Spearman gifted Estelle’s portrait to the Society in July of 2020. She retains the porcelain miniature from which it was painted.

The Alabama Department of Archives & History holds a different Powell portrait, a c. 1850 portrait of James R. Powell (“a life size bust oil painting,” dimensions 89.5 x 74.4 cm) that was gifted to the department in 1904 by his daughter Mary Powell Crane. (“A Picture of Powell,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, March 19, 1904.)

About the Person who Commissioned the Powell Portrait

Mary Powell Crane (1860-1930) lived in Plainfield, New Jersey, 23 miles from New York City, at the end of her life in a residence where her granddaughter Kerry Spearman was born. The Society’s Powell portrait was framed here at the still extant Swain Gallery. The future Mrs. Crane was born in Montgomery, Alabama to James R. and Mary Smythe Powell (1825-1902). Her mother, a former teacher at St. Wilfrid’s Episcopal

School in Marion, Alabama, contributed to her early education. During and after the Civil War, between 1866 and 1880, the Powell ladies lived in England, France (Paris), Switzerland, Germany (Dresden), and Italy, where daughter Mary was educated. During this time, her father, the first President of the Elyton Land Company and first elected Mayor of Birmingham, oversaw the founding and establishment of the city of Birmingham. His February 1873 statement to the stockholders, *cited above*, was written BEFORE the cholera epidemic of the same year. After this debacle, Powell resigned as president of the Elyton Land Co. and retired to his plantations in Mississippi, where he died in 1883.

When the Powell women returned to the United States, they lived in New York City. Mary Powell married Philadelphian James Burnet Crane in New York City in 1887. After her husband’s death in 1893, Mary Crane lived in Belzoni, Mississippi, where her father held land, and in Washington D.C. In Mississippi, Mary and her daughter Estelle were active as leaders of the statewide Suffrage Association, attending a gathering in Geneva, Switzerland in 1920. The 1920 census lists Crane living in Plainfield, New Jersey. In 1929 she traveled to Montgomery to research her father and privately published the 315-page *The Life of James R. Powell, and Early History of Alabama and Birmingham* (Brooklyn, N. Y., Braunworth & Co., 1930) that former Birmingham Public Library archivist Marvin Whiting noted was “quite accurate.” (“Biographical Sketch of Mary Powell Crane,” by Nancy Alexander Simmons, for the Biographical Database of National American Woman Suffrage Association “Suffragists, 1890-1920;” “Mary Powell Crane,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama* (online).

THE EMPEROR OF VESTAVIA

Birmingham's City Beautiful mayor George Ward was severely limited by constrained finances in his desire to buy and develop city parks and advance his City Beautiful campaigns. He compensated by encouraging and supporting not only the ladies and school children, but everyone and every organization and corporation large or small to join in. At Vestavia, his private 20-acre estate in the then wilderness along Shades Mountain, he not only bought land...but he developed it as glorious gardens during the golden age of American gardening and ran them autocratically as a Roman emperor, the way he wished it done.

The gardens were wonderful, designed by a seasoned European horticulturalist and provided with the most excellent manure: money. Like a public park Ward's gardens were opened to all. George Washington Carver documented this botanical oasis. Vestavia became the region's largest tourism attraction...with thousands of visitors annually from the mid 1920s until Ward's death in 1940. Surrounding Ward's estate, the City of Vestavia Hills would be incorporated in 1950.



Rose and cypress allée along Vesta Via, later called Vestavia Drive, leading westward to George Ward's Vestavia temple residence, 1926.

COMPLETING THE RAIL LINK TO FOUND BIRMINGHAM

SOUTH & NORTH ALA. R. R.—Col. Sam Tate, the President of the contracting company of the above road has resolved to concentrate the entire force at his command on the work between Montgomery and Elyton. That portion of the road passes through the Coal and Iron region.

The road will now be completed from Montgomery to Lime Station, 63 miles, in 15 days, and to Cahaba coal mines, 81 miles, in 45 days, and to Elyton, 96 miles, by March next.

The heavy work, under Sulphaw & Co, South of Decatur, has progressed rapidly, and will be completed as soon as possible.

The distance from Montgomery to Elyton is 96 miles. With the 20 miles already completed South from Decatur, will leave only 67 miles of this great road unfinished on the first day of March, 1871.—Decatur Times.

The Independent Monitor, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, November 8, 1870, page 2.

Memphis, Tennessee entrepreneur Sam Tate, then known as the "Southern Railway King" for his success at buying and building railroads, had a five-million-dollar contract, dated April 13, 1869, to build the South & North Alabama Railroad from Montgomery to Decatur. He agreed to deliver the road, fully equipped with rolling stock, machine shops, roundhouses, depots, section houses, water stations, etc. to Elyton by April 1, 1871. For this enterprise Sam Tate & Associates employed many subcontractors and engineers. Tate and his partner in Sam Tate & Associates, the engineer Frank Wadsworth, were among those who formed the Elyton Land Company in December 1870.

Under the direction of Captain John Gray crews had been at work at Brock's Gap in Shades Mountain for more than a year by the time the news report, *cited left*, appeared. This account stated that Tate "resolved to concentrate the entire force at his command on work between Montgomery and Elyton." Other newspaper accounts indicate that this force included 1,500 workers, among them 271 State of Alabama convicts, employed to complete the 96 miles. Tate estimated his railroad that had already bridged the Alabama River at Montgomery would be in Elyton in April 1871. Col. J. F. B. Jackson assumed command at the gap.

Tate's optimistic assessment of his entire force's ability to make it through Brock's Gap, the hard rock summit of Shades Mountain, proved overly optimistic. The task was completed in July. By September the first train from Montgomery rolled through the gap and on to Birmingham, where the new industrial center of the South was incorporated several months later on December 19, 1871.