Huntsville historians assemble for Bicentennial briefing

For the first time, nearly every historian or historical entity in Huntsville and Madison County met in the same room at the same time on June 16. The purpose was to hear an update on the Alabama Bicentennial efforts by Bart Williams, executive director of the Early Works Family of Museums. The event was sponsored by the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and was dubbed the Confederation of Historians.

The group met again on August 18, but also included historians representing 21 towns and cities in the surrounding counties of Jackson, Marshall, Morgan, Limestone, and Madison. Approximately one hundred historians were in attendance.

This later briefing was intended to encourage the historians to form their own committees to help their communities and organizations celebrate and commemorate Alabama’s 200th birthday. The three-year Bicentennial will focus on the state’s people (2017), its places (2018), and its path to statehood (2019). Alabama became a territory in 1817 and a state in 1819.

The August 18 meeting heard a report from Huntsville attorney, Julian Butler, who is chairman of the Madison County Bicentennial Committee. Bart Williams told about renovation plans for the Constitution Village where Alabama became a state.

Following the presentations, the historians conducted brainstorming discussions in small groups to develop Bicentennial ideas that are feasible for their own towns and organizations.

Organizer of the meeting, John Allen, president of the HMCHS, said that after this meeting, there may be annual gatherings through 2019. “In 2019, the Alabama Bicentennial Commission in Montgomery will shine the spotlight on Huntsville where festivities are in the planning stage to celebrate Alabama’s birth as a state,” Allen said.

New History Award to be named for Ranee Pruitt

By John Allen

For the nearly 65 years of the historical society’s existence, we’ve had noteworthy historians – or friends of history – who have gone unsung, unnoticed, unrewarded, unrecognized. And it is a shame when good work goes unrewarded. What’s more, by not offering such an reward, we are missing out on an opportunity to put history front and center in our community news outlets. This is about to change!

I hereby inaugurate the Annual Ranee Pruitt Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation for Huntsville and Madison County.

Why Ranee Pruitt? It is because she was the go-to...
person on local history in her office at the HMCP Library's Heritage Room on the third floor. Everybody came to her. She was the portal for Huntsville history. Ranee was a great idea person, and could put the right person with the right project. In addition, she had great enthusiasm and was able to find funds when needed. Ranee worked with the Civil War Roundtable, provided information early-on for the Railroad Depot, did research on historical markers, served on the board of this Society, and was a supporter of the DAR and SAR.

I have asked David Byers to chair a nominating committee to select a winner for 2017. Other committee members include Jacque Reeves, Susanna Leberman, and Ron Bledsoe.

The Award will be presented at a banquet-like luncheon on March 22, 2017 in Huntsville. Everyone reading this, please mark your calendars for that date. We will seek a note-worthy speaker for the occasion and invite the news media.

**History Outreach Program for Educators**

In an effort to raise the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society's visibility to local educators, the Society has launched the History Outreach Program for Educators (HOPE). The program includes a website which will be shared with local public schools and home schools this fall. This website brings together useful digital resources on local history from the collections of the Historical Society and the Huntsville History Collection, supplemented with the highest quality Alabama history resources from across the internet. The HOPE website is specifically designed for Madison County's public school and private school teachers as well as homeschoolers. A sample group of these educators were surveyed during the development of the website, and their feedback will allow the Historical Society to continually improve the resources it can offer to local students.

The Education Resources website, which can be accessed via the Historical Society’s homepage, compiles local history resources including lesson plans, historic music, full-text books and journal articles, historic markers, videos on Huntsville history, and spoken audio recordings from local historians. In addition, the website links to quality digital history archives which offer access to a wide range of digital images, oral history recordings, and historic newspapers. Educators can browse a full list of the website’s resources, or choose to explore resources relating to the themes of Early Statehood, the Civil War, Historic Places, African-American History, Native American History, and Women’s History.

Kelly Hamlin has been named as the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society’s HOPE Coordinator. She will be in dialogue with Madison County’s teachers to deepen the Historical Society’s relationship with local schools and better engage students with local history. If you are interested in learning more about this project, contact Kelly Hamlin at kelly.fisk.hamlin@gmail.com.

**Archival Storage Discussed**

It turns out that the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library does have extra space for archival storage, at least for the time-being. HMCHS’s John Allen spoke recently with the Library’s Special Collections manager, Dorothie Linton, about his concern for archival space.

As pointed out in the last newsletter, we regularly receive historical artifacts, records, photographs, letters, etc., often from the estates of deceased old-timers. But since we are basically a group of historians who meet four times per year to listen to a speaker in borrowed space, we are not set up to handle the archival material we receive.

We have explored the possibility of having our own storage space, maybe just a room somewhere in Huntsville, where this materials could reside, at least until it could be curated. This investigation is on-going. Meanwhile, it is not probable that the City or County would support yet another museum - a general purpose museum - at this time.

The Huntsville-Madison County Public Library's Special Collections Department accepts “found” archives. However, we don't want to inundate it as its space and staff are also limited.

And yet there may be a solution at hand. The Special Collections Department is currently beginning a complete collections survey -- a detailed inventory of what resides in its collection--and a part of this survey involves making sure that the space they do have is being used to its full potential. Already Dorothie Linton and Special Collections Archivist Susanna Leberman have identified some areas in the temperature-controlled Archives Room that are available to be used for storage.
David Hitt is September 11th Speaker

HMCHS board member David Hitt is co-author of two books, “Homesteading Space: The Skylab Story,” written with astronauts Owen Garriott and Joe Kerwin, and “Bold They Rise: The Space Shuttle Early Years.”

Hitt has worked NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center since 2002, and currently serves as a communications strategist for NASA’s Space Launch System, helping to share the story of America’s next-generation heavy-lift rocket for human and scientific exploration of deep space.

A former newspaper editor, Hitt is a native of Huntsville, and holds a bachelors degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi. He is a former chair of the National Space Society’s policy formulation subcommittee and serves as a volunteer at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center museum in Huntsville.

In addition to being members of this Society, he and his wife Rebecca are lead trolley tours for Alabama Constitution Village and field trips for the Huntsville Historic Depot, are guides for the Huntsville Ghost Walk, participate in the annual Maple Hill Cemetery Stroll, and blog for the Huntsville-Madison County Convention and Visitors Bureau. David is also a member of the Comic Science Improv comedy troupe, which performs monthly in Madison.

The meeting starts at 2:00 p.m. in the HMCP Library auditorium. For information, phone 256-539-5287.
Huntsville- Madison County Historical Society
Preserving the Past to Enrich the Future

at Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society
WWW.HMCHS.ORG

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