

The History of the Fairhope Museum

By
Roger C. Bull

A stretch of land, mostly farm land, on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay rested against coastal Alabama shorelines. To paraphrase Donnie Barrett, the Fairhope Museum Director,

“There was a time in the late 1800s that a developer dreamed of forming a municipality named Alabama City. There were maps drawn by surveyors and farmers who thought the Alabama City formation would become a reality; but that idea never came to fruition. That area, at one time was called New City Hill. Later, it was called Stapleton’s Field and Stapleton’s Pasture. It was even called Tatumville when the Fairhoppers came, because Dr. Tatum owned the empty land.”

In 1894 Fairhope was incorporated in Iowa by a Populist who first tried to found the colony in St. Charles, Louisiana.

That didn’t work. It was incorporated as a new Alabama municipality in 1908,” Barrett added. As the Fairhope Industrial Association, that became the Fairhope Single Tax Corp in 1904, put it, the forefathers “envisioned a model community with beautiful parklands, wide avenues and a sense of cooperative individualism.” A town with a ‘fair hope’ of successfully implementing Henry George’s single tax methodology, the eclectic group of open-minded and well educated elders, mostly from the Iowa Single Tax group, composed by Populist Party reformers, developed the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation (FSTC).

The first town administration, 14 years after Fairhope was founded under the new municipality, was headed by Mayor Harris S. Greeno, M.D. and the city council composed of the forefathers of this community. Those included James Bellangee, P.Y. Albright, J. M. Pilcher, W. E. Sweet, Clement L. Coleman, Charles E. Nichols and Nathaniel Mershon.

In November of 1926 Manly Northrop was elected mayor. During his tenure, the Fairhope Municipal Building, housing an office for the mayor, a fire station, a police headquarters and a community cell area, was constructed. Next door to the Municipal Building an electrical power station was constructed, prior to the City Hall. While in office, Northrop saw the first municipal sewer system and paved streets projects completed.

The City Hall, fire station, marshal’s office and jail were constructed for about \$4000.



Municipal Building and Power Plant, 1928 *

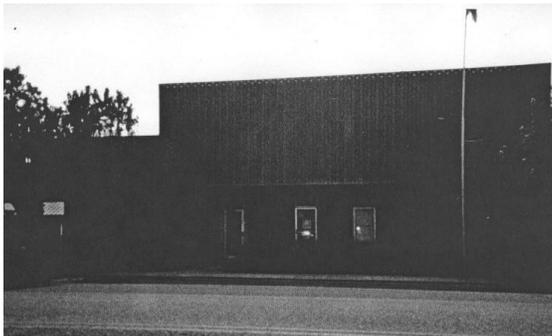
The lands, upon which the city hall and power plant were constructed, were donated to the city for municipal use by the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation. The FSTC also donated the bay front parks property.



City Hall, Fire Department & Marshal's Office, 1928 *

1971 saw Mayor Macon move the city hall out of this building and into the former Colonial Bank building on Fairhope Avenue.

In 1972 James P. Nix was elected mayor. While in office, the city council approved the purchase of the old Delchamps Shopping center, across the street and north of the City Hall building. That shopping center was converted into the new city complex building and library. The mayor moved out of the Municipal Building on Fairhope Avenue. That left the police department and the fire station in that building.



Fairhope Police Department Headquarters, 2000 *

After the Fairhope Police Department moved to a new building across the street from their old headquarters in March 2002, Larry Thomas, president of the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation in 2005, approached the city council with a proposal to convert the building into a city museum. With the city's blessing and \$750,000, the municipal building was refurbished to its original appearance with a Spanish style stucco façade.



Refurbished 2008 *

The transformation of the police station took place during 2005 to 2008. The work was performed by Cowles Murphy Glover & Associates.



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The current museum photograph, taken in 2011, shows the fire station (left), Mayor's Office (right) and the jail behind the Mayor's office. The fire chief's office and firemen's lounge, upstairs, was converted to museum offices; and the Town Council Room, 1928-1971, was turned into a meeting room.



The jubilee crab adorns the upper right of the entrance. The Fairhope Clock tracks time in downtown Fairhope on North Section Street at Fairhope Avenue. The historic plaque and signature signage of the Fairhope Museum, located on the right side of the entrance, displays with pride the heritage of a fine city. Photograph *copyright © 2011 by Roger C. Bull*.

Tim Kant was elected to the mayor's office in October 2000. He was re-elected and is serving his second term. Mayor Kant was originally hired as the city's horticulturalist, to spruce up the city and to instill pride in its citizens to clean, to restore and to freshen up the city's appearance. Kant's work, under the administration of Mayor James Nix, motivated community and business leaders to make Fairhope one of the best 'story-book' cities in the United States.

In order to fully appreciate the legacy of Fairhope and its forefathers and leaders, one must visit the museum and learn to appreciate the constructs of their city government, the collection of talents and skills of one's fellow citizens – including artists, sculptors, writers, film makers, poets, musicians, teachers and other professionals. There is much to learn in this active and beautiful archive of human endeavor.

The Fairhope Museum of History has been reviewed by none other than the Alabama Department of Archives and History authorities and proclaimed to be properly organized and operated, using correct archiving and cataloging techniques. It was considered one of the best for its size in the United States. The kudos belong to Museum Director and Curator, Donnie Barrett, his competent staff and the Friends of the Fairhope Museum who assist on a voluntary basis as docents to the museum.

In 1894, who would have envisioned the growth and prosperity of this great city? Who foresaw that a utilitarian municipal building would have such a rich history with so many transformations? Come to the museum and see the evolution of this building and this showcase

city for yourself.

**All photographs were courtesy of the Fairhope Museum of History except where noted. This historical content is based upon miscellaneous newspaper articles and magazines found in the Fairhope Museum of History and upon information provided by Director Donnie Barrett.*