

Driving Forces: Houston was shooting star of Alabama politics

By Rebekah Davis

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Note: This article is the second in a series of articles sharing the stories behind the names of some local streets.

If you want a street named after you in Athens, particularly one that denoted one of the original town boundaries, all you have to do is be one of the fastest rising political stars in Alabama politics.

After all, it worked for George Smith Houston.

When Athens was founded, the streets laid out on the town borders were named for the cardinal points: North, South, East, and West. While South and East streets are still so named and are part of the Beaty Historic District, North and West streets were both re-named for beloved citizens about a century ago. As noted in last month's issue of *The Valley Star*, North was named Hobbs for Thomas Maclin Hobbs; and around the same time, the city re-named West as Houston Street in honor of the Alabama Governor, U.S. Congressman, and Alabama Legislator from Athens.

George Smith Houston was born in 1811 in Williamson County, Tenn., and moved with his family to a farm in Lauderdale County, Ala., when he was 10. By the time Houston was 20, he was admitted to the bar, and from there his star only rose. He was elected to the state legislature from Lauderdale County a year later, and at age 30, he was elected to the first of 8 terms in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Houston's political career was not without irony. He ran for Congress as a Unionist at age 40, but then at age 50, in 1861, Houston was the one who drafted and presented the formal withdrawal of the Alabama delegation from Congress. He resigned when Alabama seceded from the Union.

When the Civil War was over, Houston was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1865; however, he was not able to serve in that capacity because Alabama was denied representation. So Houston came back to Athens to resume his law practice, but he couldn't stay out of the political arena for long.

Houston, who earned the nickname "Bald Eagle of the Mountains" as much for his tenacity as a politician as for his famous shiny dome, decided to run for Governor of Alabama at age 63, with the campaign slogans "White Supremacy" and "Home Rule." In 1874, he was elected by a landslide to the first of two 2-year terms as Governor, and the citizens of Athens turned out en masse to parade to his house two blocks west of the Square and march him back to the Square for speeches and a raucous party.

Houston was the first Democrat governor elected after the Reconstruction era in Alabama, and the next Republican, Guy Hunt, wasn't elected for more than a century.

At age 68, Houston capped off his political career and lifelong ambition with an election to the U.S. Senate, and this time, he was finally able to serve his country in the manner he had attempted years earlier. Houston served in the Senate until his death, right before his 69th birthday.

Today, Houston's namesake street passes by Athens Elementary School, homes and businesses, and most notably, Houston's former house. Now known as Houston Memorial Library, the Houston family gave the house to the City of Athens in the mid-1900s for use as a library and museum. It is currently under renovation.

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