

A Tale of Two Monuments: The connections between Limestone's Civil War and civil rights monuments

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On Thursday, Oct. 19, 2017, on the west side of the Limestone County Courthouse, the veil will fall off a bronze monument of one of Limestone County's native sons, a man who became an international civil rights hero for his decision to uphold justice for an innocent black man.

The scene likely will look much like the scene 105 years ago and half a block away, when the marble Confederate monument was unveiled and dedicated on the east side of the Courthouse. And although the two monuments may seem to celebrate two very separate aspects of local, state, and national history, the connections between the two are as close as Limestone County kinfolk.

The monument to be unveiled next week is the likeness of Limestone County Circuit Judge James E. Horton Jr., who, on June 22, 1933, set aside the verdict and death sentence of an all-white jury that found Haywood Patterson, an African American, guilty of raping two white women. Patterson was one of nine black youths falsely accused of committing acts of rape in March 1931. They were known as the "Scottsboro Boys."

Judge Horton's decision to order a new trial for Patterson cost the judge his judicial career, as he lost his bid for re-election, but it was a victory for civil rights in that it helped set a national legal precedent that the jury pool for African American defendants must include African Americans. Horton himself may have seemed the unlikeliest of civil rights heroes, however. He was born in 1878 to a Confederate veteran, Limestone County Probate Judge James E. Horton Sr., who had served as a captain in the 9th Alabama Infantry. And in May of 1922, Horton married a young widow, Anna Hobbs Frierson.

Anna's father was none other than Thomas Maclin Hobbs, son of another of Limestone County's sons who became a Civil War hero. Hobbs' father, Thomas Hubbard Hobbs, had also served as a captain in the 9th Alabama Infantry of the Confederate States Army, and had died in 1862 from wounds received in battle in Virginia. In memory of his father, Hobbs had paid the cost for a new monument to go on the courthouse lawn in 1912 after local Confederate veterans expressed disappointment in the first monument, erected in 1909.

Hobbs' stipulation was that he choose the design and the inscription of the new monument. So a white marble monument was shipped from Italy, and the inscription stated: "The knightliest of the knightly race who, since the days of old, have kept the lamp of chivalry alight in hearts of gold."

The sentiment of chivalry is not so far from the idea of justice celebrated with the Judge James E. Horton Monument. And this time, the same family – the Hobbs-Horton descendants – helped design the likeness of the judge, sculpted in Mobile, and they approved the use on the monument marker of the family motto, handed down through the generations of civil war, civil rights, and more: "Let Justice Be Done Though the Heavens May Fall."

Be part of the unveiling for the Judge James E. Horton Jr. Monument Dedication

When: Oct. 19 at 2 p.m.

Where: West side of the Limestone County Courthouse

Seating: There will be seating for the public on the courthouse lawn.

Other Details: The unveiling ceremony will include remarks by retired Circuit Court Judge Jimmy Woodroof, Limestone County Commission Chairman Mark Yarbrough, Athens Mayor Ronnie Marks, history enthusiast Chris Paysinger and prayer by Athens City Councilman Frank Travis. The Horton family will attend.

Reception: There will be a public reception after the ceremony in the courtroom where Horton set aside the verdict.