

Driving Forces: Pryor was political leader, railroad man, and mama's boy

By Rebekah Davis
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Note: This is the third in a series of articles sharing the stories behind the names of some local streets.

It is no coincidence that Pryor Street runs past the big white antebellum home and over the railroad tracks on the north side of the city of Athens. After all, the home and the tracks both owe their existence, at least in part, to the street's namesake, Luke Pryor.

Pryor's was born July 5, 1820, in Madison County. His family moved to Mooresville when he was 2, and as soon as Pryor could saw a fiddle and push an oxcart full of wood to sell, he was doing both to help bring home the bacon for his parents. As a young man he learned law in the office of Athens attorney Daniel Coleman, a former Mooresville neighbor. His admission to the bar at age 21 began a 40-year legal career that ultimately culminated in service as a U.S. Senator.

One year before Pryor was first elected to the Alabama Legislature in 1855, Pryor moved into the home, built in 1836 by James Murrah, that still stands on the corner of Pryor Street and Jefferson Street in Athens, two blocks from the railroad.

As soon as Pryor set foot in the statehouse, he took on the biggest fight of the day – the effort to pass a \$200,000 tax bill to fund railroad construction through Limestone County. The governor vetoed the bill as soon as the legislature passed it, but thanks to the moxy and grassroots lobbying of Luke Pryor and Thomas H. Hobbs, the legislature overrode the veto.

Pryor was such a friend and fan of the railroad – which cut travel time from Athens to the state capitol down from three days to just a few hours – that he came back home and lobbied for the railroad to pass right through the middle of town, as originally surveyed, instead of moving east of town, close to present-day U.S. Highway 31. When the first locomotive rolled through town in 1858, the engine was named *Luke Pryor* in his honor, and when his daughter, Memory, married William Peebles at his home in 1871, the railway lent Pryor a locomotive headlight that lit up the grounds and Jefferson Street all the way down to the Square for the occasion.

Pryor wasn't the only railroad fan in the family, and in 1859, that got him in trouble. At the time, Pryor's property included all the city lots from the home to the railroad. His mother, Anne, was living with him by then, and one day he came home and informed her that he had sold one of those lots to his friend Haywood Jones to build a house.

"Will that mean that I can't sit on the porch and watch the trains pass anymore?" Mrs. Pryor asked.

"I'm afraid so, Mother," he said.

"Luke, don't let him do it, don't let him do it," she pleaded.

That's all she had to say. Pryor went to Jones the very next day and asked him to deed back the property, and his mother was able to sit and enjoy the trains until she died in 1865.

In 1880, Pryor was appointed to fill U.S. Senate seat of his friend, George Houston, who had died in office. Following that term, he was elected to a term as a U.S. Representative, but he retired from politics at the end of the term and spent the remainder of his days mostly on his front porch, dispensing wisdom to visiting political leaders and watermelons to neighborhood children.

In 1876, his friend John Tanner wrote of Pryor: "He cares nothing for external show; you might rig him with the finest suit of clothes in New York, and before night he would have some of it on 'wrong side

up;’ he spends money faster than a gov’t press can make it, but never runs short... he is my neighbor, my friend, my attorney; we have been together in sunshine and storm, in peace and in war, in dangers seen and unseen, in smash up on railroads, enjoyed apple toddies, champagne, frolics, etc., but now we are both ‘growing old,’ let us prepare to live together in the life to come.”

Note: Much of the information for this article was taken from Mary Mason’s Scrapbook.

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Established: 1980

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