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THE OLD TOWN OF HUNTSVILLE: THE PERSPECTIVES OF ESTILL AND THOMASON

by *Jack W. Humphries*

Two men — one a Virginian and one a native Texan — have written about the old town of Huntsville. In terms of birth dates Harry Fishburne Estill and John W. Thomason, Jr. were a generation apart. yet in many respects they were contemporaries, and the perspectives on Huntsville they offered give evidence of a heritage common to both and provide insights into the development of a Southern community which was regarded somewhat accurately as both a “backwater” town and the crossroads of middle Texas.¹

Estill presented a paper entitled “The Old Town of Huntsville,” in January of 1900, at the midwinter meeting of the Texas State Historical Association held in Huntsville. It is this perspective of “the old town of Huntsville” which is considered together with the perspective of John W. Thomason, Jr., a native of Huntsville, Walker County, Texas. Estill recounted both the origins and early history of Huntsville, and his perceptions are viewed in the light of those offered by Thomason and other contemporary Huntsville historians who observed from the unassailable vantage point offered by the passing of time. Although born in Virginia, Estill spent almost seven decades of his life in Huntsville, Texas. From 1872, when his father, Charles Patrick Estill, accepted a teaching position at old Austin College in Huntsville, until his death in 1942, Harry Estill endured the rigorous classical curriculum of Austin College, enrolled in 1879 and was graduated at the top of the first class in 1880 of Sam Houston Normal Institute, filled the teaching vacancy at the Institute created by his father’s death in 1882, subsequently succeeded to the presidency of the Institute, and then guided the evolution of Sam Houston Normal for twenty-nine years to a full-fledged, accredited, degree-granting teachers’ college by the time of his retirement in 1937. Then, almost as a postscript to an already distinguished career, he spent five more years as president emeritus and as a serious student of history, making almost daily trips to campus to continue his personal writings and research.²

In 1893 Estill collaborated with Oscar Henry Cooper, a former colleague and a distinguished educator in his own right, and Mark Lemon in writing the *History of Our Country*. Seven years later, he completed *A Beginner’s History of Our Country*, which remained popular for many years as an elementary school text and secured his reputation as both a historian and a writer of textbooks. In fact,

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during his years of emeritus service to Sam Houston State Teachers College, he worked diligently to collect information which he hoped to use in writing a history of education in Texas.³

Harry Estill loved Huntsville and developed a fervent appreciation for its heritage. His Huntsville had its origins "near a bold spring of pure water, a few yards distant from the edge of a small prairie that lay like an oasis in the vast forest around it." In this idyllic setting the community developed, "properly classed among the old towns of Texas in whose annals men and events are recorded whose influence extended far beyond the limits of town and county." The educational, religious, and cultural cornerstones of the community were secured by the establishment of several churches during the 1840s, a brick academy and a Masonic Lodge in 1844, and the first newspaper, *The Montgomery Patriot*, in 1845.⁴

In Estill's judgment the first period of local history closed in 1846 when the new county of Walker was organized and Huntsville became the county seat. Soon a courthouse was built on the public square, the state agreed to locate the first penitentiary in Huntsville, Austin College, a Presbyterian school, opened in 1850, and Andrew Female College accepted its first students in 1853. Estill cited Melinda Rankin's 1850 account as evidence of Huntsville's promise and future: "A concentration of talent, enterprise, and morality is proven by the history of the town [Huntsville], and gives abundant reason for predicting its future course to be brilliant and consequential."⁵

The future, however, was not devoid of problems. Beginning at mid-century and continuing for several decades, the horizon was clouded. Efforts to secure the location of the state capital in Huntsville failed. Austin College was plagued continually with enrollment and money problems, and its law department—although the first in the state—lasted only two years. Then came "the madness of the Civil War," a dreadful, costly conflict which totally disrupted the South and Huntsville in particular. Huntsville's loyalty and spirit was aligned with the Southern Confederacy — notwithstanding the foreboding presence of General Sam Houston who had returned to Huntsville as "an old lion feeling all his wounds," to live out his life after refusing as governor to swear allegiance to the Confederacy. Not even the skill and leadership of "our matchless Lee," as Estill fondly remembered him, could overcome Union superiority. As Mae Wynne McFarland recalled, "Scarcely a family failed to send boys or men to the front, and many homes lost loved ones."⁶

Community spirit was depressed further in 1867 when a yellow fever epidemic claimed ten percent of the community's population. The decision in 1871 of the Houston and Great Northern Railroad to construct its main line east of Huntsville dealt the community yet another economic blow, and the relocation of Austin College to

Sherman in 1876 seemed to collapse all hopes. Huntsville, for a brief moment, seemed destined to go the way of old Cincinnati, its river port neighbor to the north, which had succumbed to disease and the loss of riverboat traffic.⁷

The concluding year in the decade of the 1870s ended on an encouraging note for Huntsville. The legislature decided to locate the state's first normal school in Huntsville in the building previously occupied by old Austin College. The institute's beginning may have been as unpredictable as were Governor Oran Milo Roberts' sweeping gestures as he welcomed guests during the dedication ceremonies and, in the process, toppled a glass of water on the speaker's stand. The governor recovered quickly and buoyed both school and community aspirations with the comment, "Well, you need not think that this school is going to topple over like that." With the founding of the institute and the commencement of the 1880s, Estill pronounced an end to the historic period of Huntsville.⁸

To the students at the normal school, as well as to many community residents, it was Estill who became "matchless," just as Estill had regarded General Robert E. Lee in his earlier writing. Estill's scholarly yet decidedly personable demeanor literally dominated both campus and community. Mary Kerr McDaniel's recollection captures both his spirit and humanity. Estill, who was deeply schooled in Latin, preferred a free reading, as opposed to a literal reading, of a passage. On one occasion Estill called upon a fellow classmate of Mrs. McDaniel's to translate a sentence. The young man stood and recited: "Caesar had a darned hard time crossing the Alps." The class sat spellbound momentarily while assessing whether Estill's stern moral code and decorum would see any humor in so free a translation. Then the class, led by Estill, burst into laughter. Estill observed: "That was a good reading, Charles, and I agree with you."⁹

The Old Town of Huntsville moved gracefully, yet slowly, into the twentieth century, carrying with it a legacy steeped in Confederate lore and a culture differentiated only by statute from the antebellum South. Estill succeeded to the presidency of Sam Houston Normal Institute in 1908 after the death of Henry Carr Pritchett. He served as president of the school for almost three decades while it changed from a normal school to a state teachers college, began to grant baccalaureate and graduate degrees, achieved accreditation, and added significantly to its physical facilities. Thomason reported in the mid-1930s that "The Sam Houston College is a modern and admirable plant, producing teachers."¹⁰ But in 1900 Estill could observe only that

... modern ways and city airs have gradually taken hold of and revolutionized the old town. A new graded school building, new churches, a new court house, new stores, handsome residences,

an ice factory, electric light plant, telephone system, and other evidences of twentieth century civilization are now found where sixty-four years ago the wind sighed through the pine trees that surrounded the trading post of Pleasant Gray.

In a gently pontificating manner, he concluded: "Thus is Beauty ever slain by Utility!"¹¹

If indeed a historic era of Huntsville ended in 1880, as Estill contended, another began promptly. John W. Thomason, Jr., a native Texan, was born in Huntsville in 1893. He was the eldest of nine children born to Dr. John W. and Sue Hayes Goree Thomason. In a fashion truly reflecting the talents which he embodied, he emerged as a prolific writer whose skill was acclaimed by J. Frank Dobie, as an artist whose reputation in recent years has become not only secure but esteemed, and as a soldier whose military achievements distinguished him. He pursued his formal education at Southwestern University, Sam Houston Normal Institute, The University of Texas at Austin, the Art Students League in New York, and the Army and Navy War Colleges. Prior to his premature death in 1944, he progressed to the rank of colonel in the United States Marine Corps.¹²

In a reminiscence in the mid-thirties, Thomason recalled that the withdrawn situation of Huntsville, occasioned by missing the main rail line, was not without advantage:

The main tide of progress, beginning slowly to flow into the South towards the end of the century, passed by with the main line of the railroad, and set the town as it were in a backwater. It was left sleepy and contemplative, with its school at each end of a mile-long street, and many churches between, whose bells rang artless antiphonies of Sunday mornings. The old and pleasant way remained; young gentlemen waited, as they say, on young ladies, or, more elegantly, paid their addresses, with bouquet and serenade. Social calls were made on Christmas mornings, and on New Year's afternoons. Gentlefolk passed the saloons with averted faces, and small boys were enjoined to stay away from the wagon yard, especially on Saturdays; there were frequently shootings on Saturdays. The bloods of the town rejoiced in light, high buggies, and there was good horseflesh on the roads. Families drove sedately in carriages and surreys on Sunday afternoons — large families, four to ten in a lot, who grew up, and married locally, and begot sons and daughters in their turn. The town lived much among its memories: the veterans of the Confederacy held the county offices as stoutly against old age as they had held Richmond against Grant, knowing the end to be inevitable, but with no bowing of the head; and the old soldiers sat in congenial groups that followed the sun and the shade with the seasons around the court house, from one year's end to the next.¹³

The halcyon era of Huntsville as seen by Estill and Thomason endured several more decades without interruption. World War I impacted subtly at first, then more sharply, upon the "backwater" community and its populace. By 1917 it was effecting adversely the enrollment at Sam Houston Normal Institute, and by 1918 a unit of the

Students' Army Training Corps was organized on the institute campus. Some citizens and even more of the students shared the frustrated patriotism of the young campus journalist for whom food pledges serving rooms, and war songs were not enough: "[we] wished we could poison the kaiser or do something." However, the war passed quickly, at least for Huntsville, leaving few vestiges and little change in the wake of its passage.¹⁴

As the American Expeditionary Forces were pulled out of Europe, the national "return to normalcy" encouraged Huntsville to withdraw again to its secure position as an enclave of nineteenth-century tradition conveniently protected by the pine forests of East Texas. Both the vast number of unpaved streets and footpaths as well as the town's awkward access to the main line of the railroad restated the resistance to change. Students and townspeople alike complained of the mud and impassable streets and roads. Mary Sexton Estill, a daughter of Harry Fishburne Estill, recalled of her early days in the community that to think of Huntsville was to think of *mud*. Wet weather — and there was much of it in Huntsville — forced activity to a standstill. Complained one alumnus in 1920, "Never before or since have I seen an uglier place than Huntsville . . . Up hill and down dale it went with black mud everywhere . . ." Even the introduction of the motor vehicle offered little relief until paved roads became commonplace.¹⁵

The rail link with the outside world certainly posed no threat to the isolation and comfortable provincialism of the community. Stories abound regarding why the old Houston and Great Northern Railroad — the International and Great Northern Railroad's predecessor — built its main line seven miles to the east of Huntsville through the Phelps community. Thomason suggested that the profiteering of a few local merchants in their dealings with railroad construction gangs aroused the ire of railroad officials, so they simply built their road elsewhere. Estill attributes the Phelps bypass to the failure of the Huntsville citizenry to offer a sufficiently large bonus to railway officials to build their line through the town.¹⁶

For whatever reason, the main line missed, or "dodged," as some would contend, Huntsville. Immediately community-minded citizens organized the Huntsville Branch Railway Company to lay track for the critical seven miles to Phelps — at a staggering cost to the community, since they are now at the railroad's mercy. Nevertheless, the price of pride was paid, but the tap line access to the I & GN was never the same as main line prominence.¹⁷

The Indian summer of the old town of Huntsville was characterized further by the blacks. As Thomason noted, "there were always Negroes . . ." The Aunt Janes and Uncle Eds abounded, carving out existences for themselves — even modest livelihoods in some cases —

in the stark landscape of the New South. The annual festive celebration of Juneteenth marked the slavery emancipation day in Texas with the support from black and white alike. Thomason recalled another custom in which his parents continued for years to provide an annual dinner to all of the Negroes who had worked for the family as slaves prior to emancipation.

... they would talk together of gentlemen and horses fifty years dead, of drouths and great winds and 'possum hunts half a lifetime past. And the thought has come to me: they never belonged to us — we belonged to them . . .¹⁸

However, the changes in Huntsville which impressed Estill in 1900 were incidental when compared with those which Thomason saw in the 1930s.

The concrete highways, traced where not many years ago our horses bogged in the wintertime, have opened Huntsville to the world . . . the last of the Confederate veterans has ridden slow to the cemetery, to sleep with Sam Houston under the oak trees and the cedars . . . It [Huntsville] endured the Negro cavalry and the vulturine politicians of the Reconstruction. It sits tolerantly under the Stars and Stripes again and is hospitable to the CCC. It has, I think, that rare and lovely thing called the sense of proportion.

Perhaps it was a fear of losing this sense of proportion which shaped Estill's melancholy in 1900.¹⁹

The era of historic Huntsville did not end with Estill's benediction in 1880. The irony is that far more significant milestones marking the passage of yet another historic era with the death of both Estill and Thomason within a two-year period in the early 1940s. These two totally different, though remarkably talented men, were imprinted indelibly by the legacy of a single war — a war which disrupted their respective ways of life. They were influenced strongly by two other wars, one with Spain in 1898 and then the first of the world conflicts, in 1917-18; but the even greater global conflict of World War II, which would indeed conclude a historic era for Huntsville, was one whose termination neither would see. It was this war which would, contrary to the hopes of both, thrust the "backwater" community of Huntsville squarely into the twentieth century and confront it with both challenges and opportunities which would test the mettle of its citizens as they struggled to accept the encroachment of change and progress while preserving a rich and precious heritage.²⁰

NOTES

¹John W. Thomason, Jr., "Huntsville," *Southwest Review*, (April, 1934), (quotation). Harry Fishburne Estill was born on August 12, 1861, in Lexington, Virginia. For biographical data on Harry Fishburne Estill, see Mary Sexton Estill, *Vision Realized*

(Huntsville, 1970), 218-221. John W. Thomason, Jr. was born February 28, 1893, in Huntsville, Texas.

¹Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, III (April, 1900), 265-278; Mary Sexton Estill, *Vision Realized*, 218-221; and August J. Lawrence, comp., "Faculty of Sam Houston Normal Institute and of Sam Houston State Teachers College, 1879-1940," undated, Sam Houston State University Library, Huntsville, Texas.

²Mary Sexton Estill, *Vision Realized*, 218-221.

³Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," 266-268.

⁴Estill, *Vision Realized*, 269-273; and Melinda Rankin, *Texas in 1850* (reprint edition, Waco, 1966), 144.

⁵John W. Thomason, Jr., "Huntsville," 557; Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," 276; Mae Wynne McFarland, "A History of Huntsville," *The Huntsville Item*, March 6, 1941. Mae Wynne McFarland researched carefully early Huntsville history in anticipation of a writing a history of the town. This ambition was never realized; however, the McFarland papers are deposited in the Sam Houston State University Library and offer a valuable collection of notes and materials on nineteenth and early twentieth century Huntsville, Walker County, and East Texas.

⁶Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," 276-277.

⁷Thomas U. Taylor, "Old Austin College Hall," *Frontier Times*, XVII (January, 1940), 146; Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," 31.

⁸Mary Kerr McDaniel, *Reflections of Ninety Years* (Beverly Hills, California, 1977), 121.

⁹John W. Thomason, Jr., "Huntsville," 62.

¹⁰Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," 277.

¹¹D-Anne McAdams Crews (ed.), *Huntsville and Walker County, Texas: A Bicentennial History* (Huntsville, Texas, 1976), 4; J. Frank Dobie, "John W. Thomason," *Southwest Review*, XXIX (Summer, 1944), x.

¹²John W. Thomas, Jr., "Huntsville," 57-58.

¹³Texas, State Normal School Board of Regents, Minutes, Office of the President, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, meeting of 31 May 1918; and *Houstonian* (Huntsville, Texas) November 13, 1918.

¹⁴East Texas Bicentennial Oral History Commission, Institutional History Interview with Mary Sexton Estill, Sam Houston State University, Department of History, 1976, 3; and 1920 Reunion Scrapbook of first graduating class (1880) of Sam Houston Normal Institute, Sam Houston State University Library, 179.

¹⁵Thomason, "Huntsville," 57; and Harry F. Estill, "The Old Town of Huntsville," 276.

¹⁶Walter Prescott Webb, H. Bailey Carroll, and Eldon Stephen Branda (eds.), *The Handbook of Texas* (3 vols.; Austin, 1952, 1976) I, 867.

¹⁷Thomason, "Huntsville," 60.

¹⁸Thomason, "Huntsville," 64.

¹⁹Harry Fisburne Estill died February 12, 1942, and John W. Thomason, Jr. died March 12, 1944. Both are buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Huntsville, Texas.