

The following is a copy of Chapter VII of Ben Green's book, "A History of Tuscaloosa, Alabama 1816-1949" This chapter tells about Frank Gamble Blair. This was scanned by Doster L. McMullen.

Chapter VII— 1900-1906

Cities do not grow of their own accord, but strong men can make them grow. Such a man was Frank Gamble Blair, who came to Tuscaloosa Oct. 7, 1895 presumably as a coal mine operator and remained for 40 years, during which he operated at some time practically every enterprise for the City of Tuscaloosa. There is more than a chance connection between the coming of Blair and the difference in U.S. Census figures for Tuscaloosa in 1900 and for 1930, the latter being more than three times as many thousands as the former. Records indicate that Blair may well be credited with a good portion of those added thousands.

This newcomer from Kansas City did not take the city by storm on his arrival. He quietly developed his newly acquired coal properties at 'what is now Lock 13 and for three years resided in Tuscaloosa but virtually lived at the mines. He also built a grain elevator on the M. and O. tracks. But there was a germ in the back of his brain that demanded a part in leadership of the city.

His definite arrival on the scene of city governmental activity was heralded in December, 1900, as alderman for the fourth Ward. This was the first administration of Judge William G. "Gilly" Cochrane, former probate judge and lawyer, and father of John T. Cochrane railroad magnate.

Judge Cochrane picked up the mantle laid aside by Mayor W. C. Jemison who retired from public life at the end of his tenth term. This year, 1900, was the first demonstration of the City Democratic white primary which continued biennially until 1911. There were never any final candidates other than those nominated by the Democrats, leading the Times Gazette to declare editorially 'We

announce with great gladness and solemnity that the Democrats have carried the municipal elections.'

The primary results on Oct. 18, 1900, as recorded in a paper of that date, were:

For mayor, W.G. Cochrane 263, W. T. McCormick (waterworks manager) 255; First Ward, Ormond Somerville 258, F. W. Monnish 247; Second, H. B. Herblin 307, H. Fletcher 201; Third, E. B. Nuzum, unopposed, 461; Fourth, F. O. Blair 226, E. P. Hawkins 205, J. R. Kennedy 90; Fifth, W. A. Collier 273, Sam Friedman 132; Sixth, J. W. Sanders 303, W. A. Ryan 188, H. H. Baker 24. For police chief, A. N. McGill 232, Henry J. King 217, Frank Childress 36, R. R. Thompson 27. For city clerk, Beatty Robertson 305, James F. Gallagher 119, Francis Brady 97.

This election marked a departure from previous years in that nominations were made for police chief and city clerk. This was done to prevent the appointment of these two officers to dominate the election, as had been the case for some time. It reached such a pass that the identity of the mayor candidate was lost in his stand on the police chief appointment, and the chief candidates handled virtually the entire campaign for the mayor candidates.

The mayor and his board immediately went into 'executive session' after taking their oaths of office. Said session named Anthony McGill chief of police; Beatty Robertson again clerk, Verner and Van de Graaff attorneys, Glenn Foster, treasurer; J. P. Turner, street overseer; and H. F. Burks, J. A. Ryan and A. L. Christian, policemen. Salaries were hiked to \$100 for mayor who was also city judge; \$60 and horse feed for police chief; \$50 and fees for city clerk-tax-collector-assessor; and \$5 monthly for aldermen, who met once a month.

One of the first acts was to pass a stock law, sponsored by Blair. Prior to this time pigs, cows, horses and other quadrupeds roamed the streets at will. Later the stock law was upheld in the 1902 election 168 to 132.

Saloons were on their last legs in 1901. The county had gone dispensary and it took the city with it, but not without a fight. The 1898 mayor and aldermen fought the dispensary plan vigorously, figuring it would result in a big loss to the city which was getting \$6,000 a year in licenses out of the six saloons. There was also pronounced sentiment in the city, to the effect that buying his liquor when and where he wanted it was an inalienable right of man, whether he wanted to exercise it or not.

Senator Frank S. Moody was a prime sponsor of the dispensary bill but had been unable to pass it in the 1898 legislature because Representatives H. B. Foster and W. W. Brandon took the position that the city, county, state or national government had no more right to go into the liquor business than an individual. Foster had been a leading prohibitionist since before his election as mayor. In 1900 Gen. George D. Johnston, father of the later county tax assessor, defeated Senator Moody but Foster and Brandon presented the dispensary bill for passage. In doing this they yielded to the majority rule, the county having voted by 125 majority in favor of the dispensary during the County Democratic primary.

In this election the prohibitionists were frozen out by the official ballot which read merely 'For Saloons or For Dispensary,' whereas many people wanted neither. Mr. Moody enlisted Blair, who had previously favored 'open saloons and high license' as a chief campaigner and they stumped the county for the dispensary bill. Even after the primary election Senator Johnston refused to allow the bill to go through the Senate until an amendment had deferred for one year abolition of saloons and creation of dispensaries in all incorporated towns in the county (only Tuscaloosa and Northport).

The saloons closed their doors on Jan. 1, 1902, after the city board had placed a license of \$2,500 each on not more than four places for the last six months of 1901. As compensation for the extra license dig, the saloons were permitted to remain open until midnight instead of 10 p.m. but they were not allowed to open on Sunday. The city already selected J. M. Daniel for the place of dispenser, undoubtedly the best-paid and most responsible position on the staff

of city employee. Daniel remained in the place until prohibition came on and much of the success of the dispensary can be traced to his excellent character and efficient management. F. H. Walter was his capable assistant and later purchasing agent. The dispensary operated its own bottling plant and had a crew of about 15. The dispenser was chosen from a list of three nominees presented by the County Commission.

On November 27, 1901, the board went into executive session to consider bids on liquor' and later returned from the executive sitting to authorize formal purchases in barrel lots.

The business bought bottles by the carload and furnished a matchless assortment of all kinds of whiskies, wines, brandies, beer and other liquors.

Jan. 1, 1902 the dispensary opened at the old Perry and store on the corner of Broad Street and 23rd Avenue, where Watson's and Roy's Place billiard parlor now stands. It fronted about 50 feet on Broad street with separate entrances and exits for white and negroes. The bar swung horseshoelike with a partition separating the sides.

As the saloons closed, Chairman Collier and E. B. Nuzum of the F. G. Blair and associates, W. A. Collier and E. B. Nuzum of the dispensary committee agreed to take in all remaining stocks on appraised figures. The warehouse was taxed to care for the huge supply. Later Collier and Nuzum empowered Blair to act for the entire committee and Dispenser Daniel handled the direct buying. Chairman Blair perfected a system of conduct regulations and office forms which attracted nation—wide attention and were credited with making Tuscaloosa dispensary throughout its career the best example of well-conducted municipal liquor business.

The dispensary had an enormous trade. It cleared more than \$200,000 profit in six years of operation and was gaining when the end came. The profit was split, 40 percent to the county and 60 per cent to the city. Rigid regulations forbade any drinking or loitering on the premises, no package could be carried from the place without being wrapped, liquor was both bought and sold for cash only and

the dispensary was open only on week days from 6 a. m. to 6 p. m. Long lines were seen almost daily forming at busy hours and every day at 5:55 p.m. one could see men rushing madly from all directions, striving to reach the door before closing time.

Tuscaloosa's dispensary success was recited to Birmingham by advocates of the system there. One observer estimated that it would bring \$1,040,000 revenue to Birmingham each year at that time, with the Magic City's population 125,000.

Even the most ardent foes of the dispensary soon appreciated its vast improvement over the old saloons which had dotted principal corners downtown. The famous 'White Elephant' was a favorite landmark by which to direct strangers to street addresses before streets and houses were numbered. The saloons were inevitably disorderly, they created a continuous hazard to the public and women would not pass near them if possible to evade it. Women were not permitted by law in either the saloons or the dispensary here.

Net profits of the dispensary by years were:

1902	\$23,000
1903	\$26,000
1904	\$30,326
1905	\$38,659
1906	\$36,403
1907	\$39,101

Of the county's 40 %, it was divided in three equal parts going to the Confederate pension, road and bridge, and school funds. The city's share was placed in the general fund.

On Feb. 5, 1902, Tuscaloosa came face to face with the often threatening and long-delayed debt crisis that came little short of proving a calamity to the financial standing of this municipality. The various and sundry small bond issues of the last 30 years had accumulated, the interest charges were growing and no special revenue provision had been made to meet the principal or interest.

Several years before the city had defaulted interest for a brief time, now it was faced with a forfeit of principal. That meant bankruptcy, the loss of city property which was security for the bonds, and also of a tremendous loss in faith and credit of Tuscaloosa.

At this stage Alderman Blair gave the town the first of many demonstrations of how to get money when money was needed. He made a trip to Baltimore and negotiated for the Hopkins Place Savings Bank to purchase \$125,000 worth of 20-year bonds, refunding the numerous issues sold for city hail buildings, school improvements, current expenses, floating debts and varied other items in the last three decades.

Those identical bonds came due in 1932 and the City Commission made plans to refund them again serially, this time with the proper sinking fund to take them up. If the dispensary had been allowed to remain in operation a few more years, this bond issue wouldn't have been bothering the city later. Two of the original \$1,000 bonds were paid off through a trust fund of which Blair, long since retired from city governmental affairs, remained trustee.

With this financial rescue and the dispensary success to his credit, friends of Blair suggested that he run for mayor in 1902, opposing Mayor Cochrane who sought re-election. Capt William Collier was also promoted into the battle by friends who thought his long service on the board at \$5 a month, that frequently uncollected, should be rewarded by the more profitable mayor's post.

The 'bloody shirt' which had been long buried in Tuscaloosa clothes closets was now brought to the front and waved most frantically by the Cochrane supporters. Reports were broadcast that the 'DamYankee's' father had come here with Union troops in 1866 and killed a Tuscaloosa citizen at the Warrior River. It was a frank fabrication, the only grounds for which was the fact that Blair's father-in-law had accompanied Croxton's Raiders to Selma but had not come to Tuscaloosa.

But the town voted three ways and Cochrane drew a plurality which nominated him. The ballot stood Cochrane 218, Blair 145, Collier 166 and William Baughn 4. This automatically retired Blair from the board but he remained the presiding hand of the dispensary committee and had plenty of private projects to keep him busy. Aldermanic votes in that election were:

First ward, George A. Searcy 264, W. F. Fitts 208; Second, N. P. Ormond 197, C. N. Maxwell 135, Eli Abbott 78, L. B. Herblin 59, Third, C. W. Weatherford 234, T. H. Wildman 225; Fourth, W. T. McCormick 245, F. H. Herman 211; Fifth, W. A. Hughston 257, J. W. Sanders 212; Sixth, W. A. Ryan 281, W. J. Cronier 189. For police chief, A. N. McGill 225, H. J. King 208, S. C. Weatherford 41. For city clerk, Beatty Robertson 346, John Brady 128.

Just prior to the 1902 election the city quarantined itself for the first time, ordering strict precautions to prevent smallpox to be carried here from the infested area in New Orleans. Later similar action 'was taken in reference to the yellow fever epidemic that raged in the Crescent City. Officials of the post office told the city that houses and streets must be numbered to get free mail delivery, but the administration sidestepped this delicate street-naming issue and left it to become another of the Blair accomplishments.

The Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company came to Tuscaloosa in 1902, securing a franchise, giving the city two free phones and one third off on rates for additional ones needed. Prior to this time Richard Prowell and Dan Roman had developed a private line with some 500 subscribers. Judge H. B. Foster had his own private line running to his home, orchard and office, a distance of four miles. The city board in 1902 drafted a memorial to the Tuscaloosa County Commission requesting that a new courthouse be built, a work which was accomplished four years later.

One of the first acts of the re-elected administration was to vote Blair \$200 for his dispensary direction but he immediately turned the funds over to charity, according to city minutes of that date.

An important development of the second Cochrane administration was acquisition of Evergreen Cemetery by the city, which had exhausted the area at old Greenwood Cemetery. The Greenwood plot originally deeded to the city by the U. S. government was used as early as 1824, according to gravestones there. Dr. James T. Searcy deeded the Evergreen property to the city and turned over \$1,686.86 which had been placed in a perpetual care fund by a corporation which founded the cemetery. A 3-acre addition was acquired from F. W. Monnish for \$2,250.

W. T. McCormick, alderman, resigned in 1903 in the midst of the waterworks controversy and W. H. Walker was elected from the fourth ward, beating H. P. Walker 193 to 192. Two years later Collins resigned and W. N. Faulk, later mayor, was elected over J. B. Murphy 144 to 6.

The city prison contract was finally let in December, 1914, resulting in a small jail in the rear of the city hail. It was then sufficient to care for the criminal element in a town of 6,700.

The sweeping street and sidewalks improvement program which followed several years later began to appear in 1905 when Prof. E. K. Kay of the University offered to survey the streets and W. A. McCalla and Co. proposed to plan a sanitary sewer system. Both projects were later undertaken with fruitful results. The long unsatisfactory Tuscaloosa waterworks system reached the mess stage in 1903 and after much wrangling with Jeter and Boardman, their franchise was rescinded.

The water was brackish, service inconsistent, promised fire plugs were not installed and the contract of 1887 was generally in effect abrogated, the city maintained. After revoking of the franchise the firm was operated by a receiver until the city purchased it in 1907 for \$30,000. Blair took one of his money-making trips east and secured heavy backing for this purchase but the auction price was so low that outside aid was not needed. Blair was made president of the waterworks commission and instantly initiated improvements in the system to be recounted later in this series.

In this manner Blair's greatest civic projects were undertaken either before or after his mayoralty administration. However, his administration from 1904 to '06 was noted for its own progressive action. He dared life-long sentiment and changed the names of streets, giving them numbers. They had been named for U. S. presidents and prominent families. In order to do it in thorough fashion, as everything he did, the mayor brought a street-numbering expert from Detroit for the purpose. They laid out the town with streets north and south and avenues east and west. It was then that the mayor figured that 24 blocks east of Greensboro avenue would care for the city's growth in that direction for the next 50 years. Therefore Greensboro was made 24th, although never popularly called that. Records show that the street numbering business is the only thing Blair ever undertook in a civic way that was not a complete success. He helped destroy its efficiency by literally sweeping the town eastward with his Pinehurst development five years later.

Another 'street fight' of 1905 was that between Greensboro Avenue and Broad Street, contending for the city's business development. At one time it became so heated that the post office, then a portable object, was transferred bodily one night from Broad Street to a place on Greensboro. These two streets maintained their name identity after the numbering system was installed and so did Queen City Avenue (18th). In 1901 the name Broad Street had been substituted for Main Street, marking Tuscaloosa's final emergence for the hick town' stage.

On July 11, 1904, the city white primary nominated Blair for mayor, citizens refusing to listen to the fabricated factionalism after seeing the constructive genius of 'this interloper from Kansas.' Blair defeated W. G. Cochrane 318 to 159, exactly 2 to 1. W. A. Ryan first announced but withdrew.

Charles W. Weatherford appeared on the board of aldermen in this year, marking the coming of one of the city's most faithful and constructive board members. He was long retained by citizens and

later was the only man to serve on both the board of aldermen and the City Commission.

Aldermanic results of the election were: First ward, C. W. Weatherford 287, L. B. Herblin 190; Second, George A. Searcy 273, C. N. Maxwell 297; Third, R. E. Rodes 252, E. W. Hausrnan 224; Fourth W. H. Collins 324, J. H. Kennedy 127; Fifth, E.N. C. Snow 287, W. A. Hughston 185; Sixth, W. A. Ryan 232, A. F. Prince 232.

The Times-Gazette said a new law permitting only 'bona-fide residents' to vote caused the light ballot which was little more than half the total cast in the heated campaign of 1890, when half the voters were negroes.

Mayor Blair delivered a lengthy message to his board, marking the second time in the city's history that such a thing had been done. A city health officer was appointed in 1905, Dr. H. J. Hargrove being the first man to fill this role, which later was to give Tuscaloosa a great sanitary system.

Growing Tuscaloosa took her own census in 1905, the mayor securing C. B. Pippen, later policeman, and S. S. Hulseby, later a Reform merchant,, to do the work. It took little more than a month, the results being white population 3,507, negroes 3,119, total 6,626.

Meanwhile, prohibition was gathering force throughout the county and the county appeared destined to drag the reluctant city along with it. The probate judge called a prohibition election for September, 1906, in answer to petitions presented under the local option act adopted in 1881. It called for another fight which raged for many months.

During 1906 the city's latest revised code was authorized and drawn up by Verner and Van de Graaff, attorneys. This was one of the last official acts of Mayor Blair, but the end of his term did not mean the termination of his Tuscaloosa building. In fact, that aggressive, successful and far-sighted genius who applied the yardstick of

practicality to the unrealized visions of W. C. Jemison remained active in civic circles until his death.