

High Adventure at the Lowndes County Courthouse.

A Kid in The Cupola - A Tyke in the Tower

Background Information that brought this Story to the Museum

A few years ago friends from youth met at the museum. Dr. Claude Godwin of Titusville, Florida, planned his trip to donate WWI and WWII items to the museum to coincide with George and Lucille Converse of Cincinnati, Ohio, being in Valdosta to visit family and others.

Hearing portions of their conversation topics, I particularly remembered the story of the young boy slipping off from the bench where his father had seated him and his daring adventure that led to climbing into the cupola at the top of the courthouse. I knew that at some point I needed to contact George Converse to best document this courthouse adventure from his childhood.

At the Wall Breaking Ceremony for the Rehabilitation and Restoration of the 1905 courthouse Chief Judge Richard Cowart mentioned that so many have memory of a life event that brought them to the courthouse. Again, a prompting to contact George Converse about his childhood courthouse adventure.

A few weeks ago the museum received a Memorial donation honoring Archie Griffin from his friends George and Lucille Converse. Again, a reminder, and I then called the Converses so the "Climb to the Cupola" could be recorded and documented for downtown Valdosta and courthouse lore.

The courthouse adventure is best remembered as occurring in 1938, as George's sister, Marie Converse Smith of Valdosta, was not yet born. George was "age 5 going-on 6." George does recall, "I climbed as high as I could go, there was nothing else to climb." Project architect Celine Gladwin of Gladwin-Vaughn Architects who has climbed up into the top said his description fits the path of reaching the upper cupola.

The story as remembered by George Converse follows on page two.

Upper Right: George Converse, Jr., in a family portrait near the age when his courthouse adventure occurred. The full family portrait of the excerpt is on page two.

Lower right: A watercolor rendering of one courthouse dome and the cupola by Deanna Wagoner which she recently donated to the museum. She painted this from her second story apartment window when she resided in the Dasher Building, it in the southwest corner of Patterson Street and Central Avenue, the building with the turret.



George Converse, Jr., a Courthouse Adventure

Recorded in August 2022 by his daughter Elizabeth Converse. The event occurrence is recalled as 1938.

"Growing up in Valdosta, Georgia was loaded with adventure, and I had plenty of it with my buddies: Frank Strickland, Archie Griffin, Claude Godwin, Jake Fleming, Johnny Lastinger and Van Opdenbrow, to mention a few. We spent many hot, humid gnat-swatting days exploring the Mile Branch, somewhat like Huck Finn in the Mississippi: skipping stones, catching minnows, tadpoles, crawdads, salamanders, and frogs and such. But my buddies were not with me the day I explored the courthouse.

My father, George Lang Converse, was an attorney in Valdosta. I was 5 going-on 6 years old and my mother, Virginia, asked him to watch me for the day. He had business to attend to at the Lowndes County Courthouse, so he sat me on the bench in the hallway to wait for him.

When he stepped out to retrieve me, the bench was empty. He searched and called for me inside the courthouse, no luck. Frantically, he rushed outside hoping to find me wandering around on the grounds, still no luck.

Instead, he saw people staring and pointing up to the top of the courthouse. My father joined the crowd and saw me looking out from the cupola and possibly waving.

If memory serves, it was a challenge getting to the top because there was a series of ladders I had to use to get to the best view. Details of my descent are vague. I was excited to tell father that I could see clear to the Cotton Mill. He did not share my enthusiasm. Rather, I received a serious talking to and three swift spanks to my bottom. I was puzzled. It just goes to show you: No matter how high you climb in life, there are unexpected consequences. "

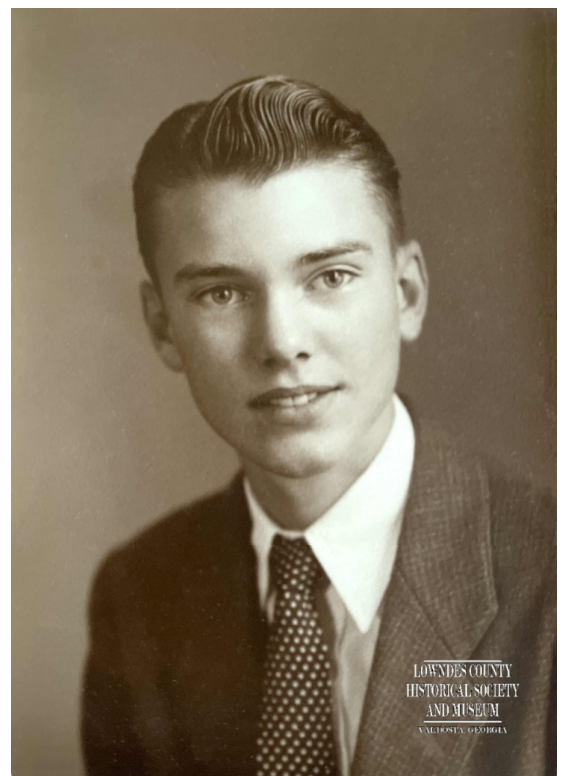


Above Right: A family portrait ca. 1938. George Lang Converse, Sr, with wife Virginia Jones Converse and their son, George, Jr., known as 'Sonny' in his Valdosta youth. George Converse, Sr., an attorney, died young at age 45 in 1953. **Below left:** Father of George Converse, Sr., William Loraine Converse, 1857-1926. He was instrumental in achieving the college for Valdosta in 1906 and in funding the first building which opened in 1913. It would be named in recognition of his efforts, Converse Hall. **Below right:** George Converse, Jr. The photo is from the 1949 VHS Sandspur yearbook, his Junior year at Valdosta High School.



George, Jr., would attend Emory Junior at Valdosta and then Emory University until drafted into military service. After the military he attended Valdosta State for a year and then Georgia Tech on the G.I. Bill. He graduated from Georgia Tech in 1960 with a BS in Mechanical Engineering and a Masters in Nuclear Engineering.

After two years in San Jose, CA completing General Electric's advanced engineering program, he transferred to Cincinnati, Ohio. His 34 year career with GE included designing aircraft engine components and working with NASA. He retired in 1994. His wife Lucille Helms is a 1955 graduate of VHS and of VSC in 1959.



The Courthouse Provided a Room With a View

At the Wall Breaking Ceremony recognizing the beginning of the Rehabilitation and Restoration of the 1905 historic courthouse, Senior Judge Richard M. Cowart included in his remarks commentary on the courthouse being a site of noted events in citizens lives.

Casually mentioning the courthouse for remembered events, people have told of marriages, marriage licenses, registering to vote, deeds and documents, signing contracts to work for the Lowndes County Board of Education and serving on a jury.

From this newsletter editor, my memorable courthouse experience involves serving on a jury for the first time, 1973, age twenty-two. The memory isn't the trials, but being in the jury room in the north-west corner of the building. Outside the window in the next block, swinging from a crane, the wrecking ball was taking down the storied Ritz Theater.

Also remembered, earlier Wildcat football star player Sonny Stephenson served as jury foreman on this case. (see page 6)

At right is one of only 4 or 5 photos of the Ritz demolition in the museum archives. This Ritz rear snapshot is taken on Valley Street from beside First Methodist Church. Do notice the sparse amount of safety precautions. Our archives has an informative feature article on this demolition by Tenny Griffin of the **Valdosta Times**, titled "**The Last Picture Show**" Albert Pendleton wrote about the demolition in the June 29, 1973

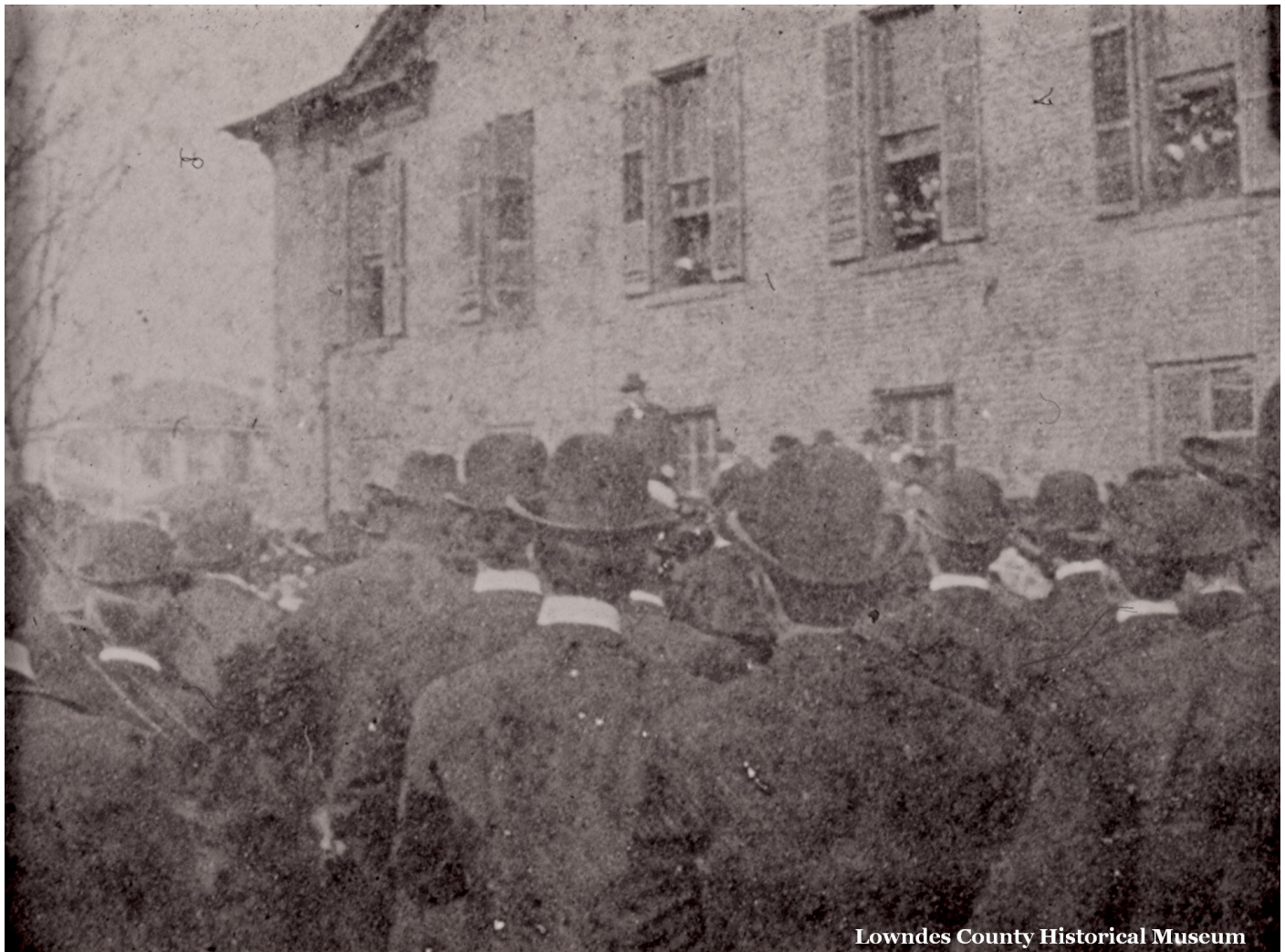


Society newsletter, his title **The Last Show at the Ritz**. Albert was allowed to search the Ritz for artifacts and reports on the effort. **Below:** The aerial photo shows rooftop views of the First National Bank, **left**, and the Ritz Theater, **right**. The bank would soon buy the theater property for expansion. It currently is Lowndes County offices. Going back many years ago, the bank location was the site of the William Loraine Converse home (*his photo page opposite*). Three Converse brothers had homes in this block. The Converse Dalton Ferrell House is the only one remaining. The last footprint of the W.L. Converse home is in the 1930 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps with the Ritz Theater immediately beside. The partial roof of 306 North Restaurant is in the extreme lower right in the photo. The impressive Albert Converse home was between 306 North and Covington's Restaurants.



Nineteen Days After this Photo, Demolition of the 1870s Lowndes Courthouse Began

The photo *below* has one companion image. They are in rough condition and are the only known surviving images of the 1870s courthouse. These undated, until now, photos were known to be William Jennings Bryan when in Valdosta. It was proposed by VSC faculty and others, to be during one of his campaigns for President of the United States. He ran for the office in 1896, 1900 and 1908. It could not be 1908, so we did electronic searches of Georgia newspapers for 1896 and 1900 and surprisingly found nothing. The Bryan visit to Valdosta was found to be in 1904. He was crossing north Florida and Valdosta became a sudden additional stop with his appearance having only a day's notice. Bryan spoke in Valdosta on February 17, 1904 and this visual recording of his visit brought us our only surviving photos of this courthouse.



Lowndes County Historical Museum

**Articles on Wm. Jennings Bryan Speaking in Valdosta.
Taken from the Savannah Morning News**

**Bryan at Valdosta To-day
Savannah Morning News February 17, 1904
from Valdosta Times of February 16.**

Col. William Jennings Bryan will speak in Valdosta to-morrow afternoon, having accepted an invitation extended him in Madison, Fla., to-day. Col. Bryan has never spoken in the immediate neighborhood and he has never had a very great following here, Valdosta having always been solidly for sound money and the Cleveland brand of Democracy. For these reasons it is interesting to know what sort of a reaction the Nebraskan will receive.

**Savannah Morning News Feb 18, 1904
From Valdosta Times Feb. 17, 1904
Bryan At Valdosta
He Did Not Meet With General Sympathy
in the Views He Expressed**

William Jennings Bryan spoke here this afternoon to a large audience of men, women and school children in the Court House square. Mr. Bryan came almost unexpectedly, the announcement being made only yesterday, though it was well advertised last night and this morning.

Mr. Bryan was taken charge by a committee of twelve from the Board of Trade [*before Chamber of Commerce*], including Republicans and 'goldbugs' and 'silverites.' Probably three-fourths of the audience was opposed to his views on the money question, though he was given an exceedingly cordial hearing and was frequently applauded.

His speech indicated some bitterness as a result of the campaigns four [1900] and eight [1896] years ago.....

.....A feature of Mr. Bryan's visit was a delightful luncheon at the Valdosta [*Valdes, new in 1902*] Hotel from 1 to 2:30 o'clock. It was his first appearance here, and though the people rather enjoyed his visit, it is the opinion of three-fourths of those who heard him that he will not be the great factor in the party that he has been heretofore.

Devastating First Methodist Fire Discovered Early Morning Monday, February 15, 1904

Searching to find information on the WJB visit here provided us bonus Valdosta news covering the First Methodist Church fire.

Fire caught from an Over-Heated Flue – The Loss \$16,000. Valdosta Ga., Feb. 15 (in Savannah Morning News Feb. 16)

The burning of the Methodist Church building this morning involved a loss of about \$16,000. The insurance is about \$7,000. It looked for a while as if the entire block would be destroyed, though the wind was blowing the flames away from the adjacent building.

The fire probably originated during church services from a defective flue. The janitor had the stoves red-hot, the fires being so large that the pastor reprimanded him after the services about building such big fires. The theory is that the fire caught the lathing and was communicated to the ceiling in the course of three or four hours. The entire interior of the building was ablaze before the alarm was sounded and nothing was saved.

The parsonage was threatened, but it was saved. The fireman had four or five streams playing on the fire for an hour or more, but the fire was so intense that the water had little effect.

The members of the official board met to-day and decided to rebuild the church at once. It is probable that the new edifice will be larger and a handsomer building than the old one.

TO REBUILD BURNED CHURCH

Valdosta Methodists will Erect \$30,000 Edifice

Valdosta, Ga., Feb 16 (in Savannah Morning News Feb. 17)

The Methodist congregation has set bravely to work to rebuild the church which was destroyed by fire Sunday night. [Monday morning] The new structure will be much finer than the old one. The burned building cost \$15,000 and the new one will cost \$30,000, exclusive of site and several thousand dollars worth of material, which has already been contributed. At a meeting of the congregation to-day it was decided to add \$15,000 to the \$7,000 of insurance and start work at once. Three of the old walls will be used, though the rear wall will be torn down and set further back, making the building much larger. About \$10,000 has already been subscribed for the new building

At right: The pen drawing at right is one of several included in the 1895 **Harvest Edition** of the **Valdosta Times**, perhaps their first community promotion special publication. We do not know of a surviving issue and have to get the images from microfilm. We first learned of this edition from Susie McKey Thomas' abstracts that occasionally referenced it. With no City Directory until 1904, the Harvest Edition is very helpful with 1890s businesses and structures.

DURING THE LAST MONTH, 1870s Courthouse

February 15, 1904 Monday Early Morning.

First Methodist disastrous fire discovered.

February 17, 1904 Wednesday. William Jennings Bryan speaks on Court House square.

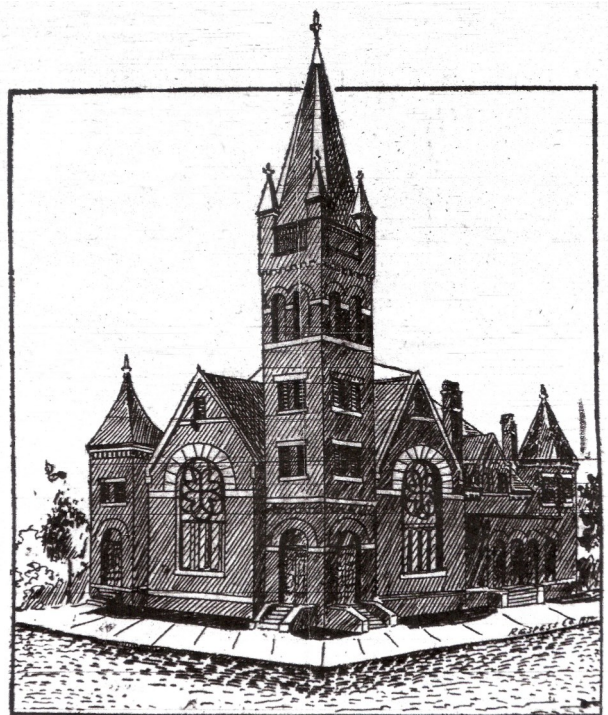
... and the only known surviving photos that show the 1870s court house are taken.

February 20, 1904 Court House contract let.

March 8, 1904 Demolition of the 1870s Court House begins

March 12, 1904 Demolition of same is reported at near completion.

Construction activity begins on the 1905 structure.



THE NEW METHODIST CHURCH.

Valdosta's NEW COURTHOUSE

From Valdosta Times Mach 8, 1904 & Savannah Morning News March 9, 1904

Work of Demolishing the Present Building Will Begin To-day

The county convict gang will begin tearing down the Lowndes County court house to-morrow to make room for the handsome structure which is to take its place. The old building was erected in [the 1870s] at a cost of \$14,500. It was built of brick manufactured in Valdosta, Judge J. C. Wisenbaker, still a citizen, being the contractor. Some want to purchase brick to build chimneys. The building in those days was a handsome structure, but for the last ten years it has been entirely out of harmony with the handsome buildings that have gone up all around it.

Contractor Algernon Blair wrote the County Commissioners yesterday that his bond issue has been approved by the Fidelity and Deposit Company of Baltimore, and he will be here in less than ten days to begin work on the new building.

The Old Courthouse Is Gone

The Valdosta Times March 12, 1904

Article Segments The Old Building is Now a Thing of the Past
The County Convict Gang Made Quick Work of its Destruction and
Hardly a Fragment of It Will be Left Standing by Tomorrow Night.

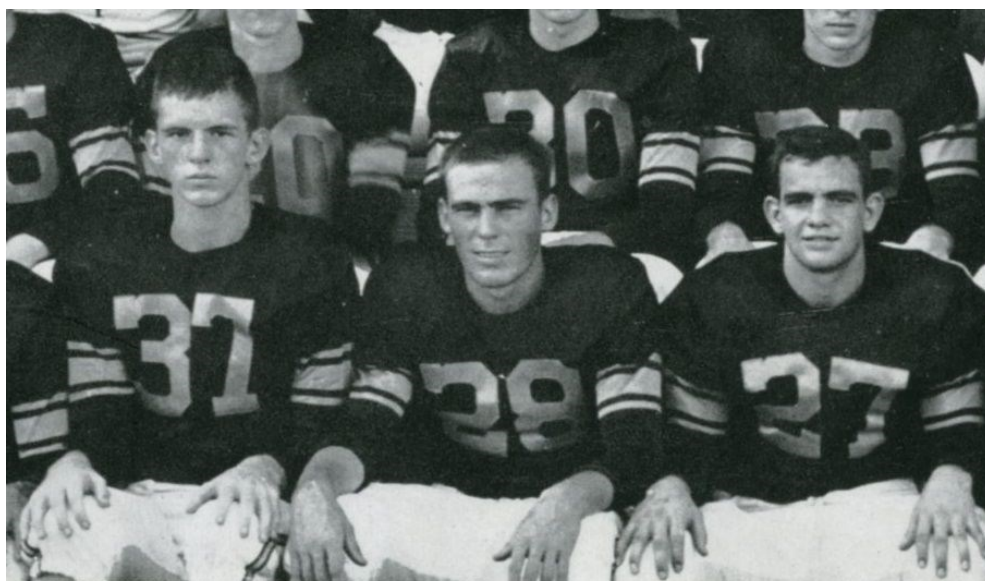
The Courthouse, First Methodist Sanctuary and The McKey Building

It is 2022 and three major structures on/in our historic courthouse square are currently undergoing restoration and rehabilitation. In 1904, 1905 and 1906 these same downtown buildings were in original construction or in the case of the then fairly new First Methodist sanctuary, a significant enlargement remodel after a devastating fire. A plaque in the alcove of the main entrance to the 1905 courthouse entrance lists T. S. McKey, County Commission Chairman. In 1906 he with his brother W. H. McKey, constructed the McKey Building across the street that is now under restoration by Daniel Bayman, becoming a boutique hotel named The McKey It is also home of GUD Coffee.

2022 MEMBERSHIPS

Con't. from previous newsletter

Joanne Daniel Bassford
Howard Beaty
Tommy A. Clark
Belmont, MS
Byron and Katherine Courson
Judge Richard and Jeanne Cowart*
Carmen Ellis
Mike and Teresa Gudely *
James W. Hall
Julie E. Hunt **
Tifton, GA
Jim E. Jarvis
Dr. Brantley and Barbara Jenkins
Elaine Parrish McMillan
Dutton and Donna Miller *
Lt. Col. Lynda J. Richardson ***
Jane and Ben Stanaland
Ed Wagnon
Gary Wisenbaker *



THE 1947 FOOTBALL SQUAD

LOWNDES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND MUSEUM
VALDOSTA, GEORGIA

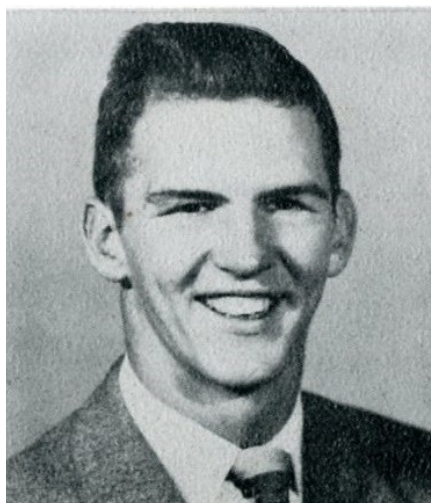


SONNY STEPHENSON AND BILLY GRANT:

VALDOSTA INSURANCE AGENCY VALDOSTA GA=

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE GREATEST TWO MAN TEAM OF VALDOSTA
HIGH SCHOOL. WE KNEW YOU WOULD WIN CHAMPIONSHIP. FOR YOUR
SCHOOL. BEST WISHES FROM ONE OF YOUR VERY PROUD FANS=
ARCHIBALDS GRANDMOTHER.

Our Gratitude to Archibald Little 'Archie' Griffin. 1933-2022



The Lowndes County Historical Society Trustees and Staff send our condolences to Lee Griffin, the children and extended family. The Griffin family significantly assisted the Lowndes County Historical Society in its early years. The Society was founded in 1967 with only a small area in the Carnegie Library basement for exhibits. The Griffins had purchased the Fender home at 1110 N. Patterson and they provided it to the Society for a museum at no charge from 1971-1977, when the Carnegie building became the museum. **A Golf story told at Archie's service:** Archie defeated Arnold Palmer in a golf match! Archie had gone to Georgia Tech but then played golf for the University of Georgia. UGA was in the regionals versus Wake Forest for advancement to nationals., UGA did not expect to defeat Wake and did not. However, UGA Archie was directly paired against the Wake collegian Arnold Palmer And defeated him in this round of golf.

Images: Left, Archie Griffin, 1950, VHS Senior. Above, Upper, 1947 State Championship football players, sophomore Archie Griffin and Seniors Sonny Stephenson and Billy Grant, Above, Lower: Western Union telegram to Stephenson and Grant from "ARCHIBALDS GRANDMOTHER." (Stephenson, also see page 3 of newsletter)



MEMORIALS



Elizabeth 'Bette' Reimet Bechtel

By
Dr. Owen K. Youles, Jr.

Linda Wilbanks Burch

By
Charles and Carolyn Cox
F.D. Toth

Sue Zeigler Cox

By
Donald O. Davis
Mary D. Gray
J. Edward Willis

Eleanor 'Sweetie' Calley

Story Cross
Augusta, GA
By
Mary D. Gray

Marion Anice Roberts Cross

By
Fred DeLoach III
Sandy Springs, GA
Dr. Owen K. Youles, Jr.

Mildred Sheffield Evans

By
Judge Richard M. and Jeanne Cowart

Archibald Little 'Archie' Griffin

By
George and Lucille Converse
Cincinnati, OH
Gloria B. Corker
Donald O. Davis
Mary D. Gray
Lilla Kate Parramore Hart
J. Edward Willis
Dr. Owen K. Youles, Jr.

John Toole Holcombe, Sr.

By
J. Edward Willis

The Honorable Judge H. Arthur 'Mac' McLane

By
Gloria B. Corker
Fred DeLoach III
Sandy Springs, GA
John Kent and Vikki Edwards
Mr. and Mrs. James W. Hall, Jr.
Wesley and Julie Street
M. Deanna Wagoner

John Thomas McTier, Sr.

By
Dan and Carolyn E. Coleman

Willis 'Wyn' Linton Miller III

By
Wesley and Julie Street

Edward 'Ed' Crawley Minton

By
Charles and Letty Allen

Robbie Ann Blanton Moody

Opelika, AL
By
Ronnie and Bebo Blanton
Judge Richard M. and Jeanne Cowart
Donald O. Davis

John Gregory Odom

By
Dan and Carolyn E. Coleman

Joyce Bullington Paine

By
Gloria B. Corker
Mrs. Everitte Force and Family
Wesley and Julie Street

Jadan Altman Pitcock

By
Donald O. Davis

Freling Hand 'Fritz' Scarborough, Jr.

By
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Marie Giddens Sirmans

By
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Cynthia 'Cindy' Faith Waller Slaughter

By
Donald O. Davis
Beulah Exum Hennly

Jani Shirah Stump

Ft. Valley, GA
By
Judge Richard M. and Jeanne Cowart

Joseph R. 'Sonny' Vickers

By
Donald O. Davis
J. Edward Willis

Dr. Hugh Harris West, Sr.

By
George and Polly Talley

Ronald Terry 'Ronnie' Wisembaker

By
Ronnie and Bebo Blanton

Joanne Myrick Youles

By
Dan and Carolyn E. Coleman

Dr. Owen Kay Youles, Jr.

By
CalmWater Advisors
Columbia, SC
Lamar and Florence Cole
Donald O. Davis
Mary D. Gray
Lilla Kate Hart
J. Edward Willis

Dr. and Mrs. Owen K. & Joanne M. Youles

By
Gloria B. Corker

Mail to: LCHS
P.O. Box 56
Valdosta, GA 31603

2022 Membership Application

Lowndes County Historical Society

Membership Category

Individual \$25. ____
Family 30. ____
Business 50. ____
Contributing 100. ____
Patron 250. ____
Life 1,000. ____

Name _____
Address _____
Phone _____
Email _____

MUSEUM CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Officers and Executive Committee

President, John R. Bennett; 1st Vice President, Ronald Irwin; 2nd Vice President, Mary Young Manning; Secretary, Carol M. Irwin; Treasurer, Ed Hightower; Past President, Ex Officio, Sally Shingler Kurrie

September 15..... Society Meeting with Program, Bird Annex
 September 17..... Constitution Day with DAR Chapters at the Bell
 November 11, 11 A.M. Armistice Day Bells of Peace at the Museum
 November 24-26Closed During Thanksgiving
 December 15, 4 p.m. (to be confirmed)LCHS Membership Meeting
 December 24– January 3.....Annual End of Year Closing
 January 2023.....Annual Membership Drive Emphasis Month
 Exhibit Restoration Continues, Archives Expansion in Bird Annex Continues

Lowndes County Historical Society & Museum

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Fax: (229) 247-2840

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Web page:

<http://www.valdostamuseum.com>

YESTERDAY & TODAY

Newsletter of
 Lowndes County Historical Society

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Renate Milner
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 & Social Media

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 Textiles Consultant

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