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Magnolias and Ironwork: The End of a Campus Landmark

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Magnolias And Ironwork

By Mary Bondurant Warren

TAKE a long look at the lovely Institute of Law and Government building on the University campus for it will soon be replaced by the new wing of the Lumpkin Law School. This house blends the simple professor’s residence of the 1840’s and the exquisite medallions of ironwork designed for the "Old State House" at Milledgeville.

In earlier days the University provided housing on the campus for its faculty members, who were supposed to "keep an eye on the boys" quartered in Old and New Colleges. This residence was built in 1845 of locally made brick, and was for a time the home of the University’s most famous teacher, Richard Malcolm Johnston. The tall magnolia on the southeast side of the house was planted by Johnston during his residence here from 1857 to 1861.

Richard Malcolm Johnston, a native of Powelton, Georgia, was educated in the usual country school and at Mercer University. Johnston "read law" and was admitted to the bar. He practiced with his partner Linton Stephens, brother of Confederate Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens. Soon, however, Johnston deserted the bar for teaching and became a member of the University faculty with the large title and small salary of Professor of Belles Lettres, English Literature, and History.

A contemporary described Johnston in
IRONWORK detail from the Savannah Chamber of Commerce Building, showing Thomas Jefferson medallion with original side ironwork.

this manner: "A lawyer by profession and a student by taste, he brought to the chair to which he was elected plenty of common sense, and a thorough knowledge of boys. Full of humor, gentle and kind, he attracted a student at first sight. Quick to detect a deceiver and, if by chance he did any injustice to a student, he was quick to offer him the apology due a gentleman in the presence of the class. He endeavored to cultivate in the young men an innate love of truth and honor for their own sake. Johnston was a favorite with all — young and old, students, faculty and citizens. He and Mrs. Johnston, both accomplished musicians, were always in demand at every social gathering and there was universal regret when they left Athens."

Johnston resigned from the faculty in 1861 because his feelings on the impending Civil War were in opposition to those of the Trustees and most of the student body. Both he and Alexander H. Stephens believed the war to be a grave mistake. With his family he retired to Powelson where they stayed for the duration of the war. Soon after the war was over they moved to Baltimore, Maryland where he opened "Pan Lucy" a most successful boys school.

In his later years he contributed numerous short stories to the flourishing literary magazines of the day, and became recognized as one of the outstanding authors of that period. His stories immortalize the people of Dukesborough (in reality Powelson). The scenes are laid in the small middle Georgia town before the tragic Civil War. He commits to paper the dialect and feelings of the common man, his fears and foibles in those antebellum days. Johnston's stories told of the white man much as Joel Chandler Harris did of the Negro in his "Uncle Remus Stories." Until his death in 1898 Johnston chronicled the humorous happenings of the plain Georgia cracker for all the world to enjoy. For a refreshing excursion into bygone days.

THE WETTER HOUSE, now demolished, Savannah.
MAGNOLIAS—

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Wetter House there at the corner of West Broad and Oglethorpe Streets. The original ironwork contained the busts of many famous men, among them Jackson, Jefferson, Clay, Addison, Dante, Milton, Franklin, Calhoun, Washington Irving, Charles Carroll, and Washington. When the Wetter House was razed portions of the grillwork were obtained by Chancellor Caldwell, and other portions were retained in Savannah on their Chamber of Commerce Building.

Dean Alton Hosch, of the Lumpkin Law School, assures us that this historic and attractive ironwork will be incorporated into the new portion of the Law building to be enjoyed for many years to come.