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— J O H N C . L A T H A M —

It has been said many times that Hopkinsville has produced and exported men and women who have gone forth and established themselves in their professions and careers and brought much notoriety to their hometown. Even today you can hardly name a major city in the United States in which a son or daughter of Hopkinsville or Christian County has not distinguished themselves in their chosen field. However, none made more of an impact on his hometown than John C. Latham, Jr. He died in 1909, but here in 1981 some 72 years later we have many reminders of his generosity, his concern, and his genuine love for the town and the county of his nativity.

John C. Latham Jr. was born October 22, 1844, in a house that stood at the corner of 7th and Liberty on the present site of the Town House apartments. His paternal grandparents were John and Nancy Morehead Latham. They came to Christian County in the early part of the 19th century from Logan County having settled there after leaving Virginia sometime earlier. They settled on a farm east of Hopkinsville in the area of Cherokee Park, the New Era building and the Ellis Underwood farm on the Pembroke Road. Both of them, John and Nancy Morehead Latham, are buried in the old Indian graveyard where the two Cherokee Chiefs who died at the winter encampment of the Trail of Tears are interred in Cherokee Park, in the present backyard of Woodrow Hunter. Their graves are marked by stone slabs. The Lathams were there before the Cherokees. John Latham died in 1821 and Nancy Latham in 1827. Neither was 50 years of age. They left a large family one of whom was John Campbell Latham, Sr., the father of the subject of this paper. John C. Latham, Sr. married Virginia Glass, the daughter of Dr. David Glass. The Glass name was prominent in the early annals of the county, but few if any descendents remain in

the community today. To this union were born three children. John C. Latham, Jr., Charles Latham and Rebecca Latham. John C. Latham, Sr. served in the county court clerk's office as a deputy and operated a clothing store and on May 1, 1865, he and others organized the Bank of Hopkinsville in the old Main Hotel Building -- the present site of the Woody Winfrees' Insurance office and the Marinello College of Beauty. The bank later built the building at 7th and Main in 1880 which now is part of Cornette's Office Supply. John C. Latham, Sr. was President of The Bank of Hopkinsville from its founding in 1865 until his death in 1885.

The Latham family lived on the corner of 7th and Liberty until 1856 when the Senior Latham purchased the Thomas M. Buck home which had been built in 1845. This home stood on the grounds which now constitute Virginia Park, and this house was the Hopkinsville home of the Lathams until John C. Latham, Jr.'s death in 1909. Soon thereafter, portions of the house were moved to a site on Alumni Avenue where it still stands and is presently occupied by Randy Rutland.

So much for the forbearers of John C. Latham, Jr. -- very little is known of the early life of Mr. Latham, but it is presumed that he received his education in whatever facilities were offered in the community during this period.

The first record we were able to discover of his activities was from a newspaper clipping from the New York World of May 20, 1906 which referred to his enlistment in 1861 in the Confederate Army. He was initially a private in the Eighth Kentucky Infantry. He served in the Confederate Army for the entire war. Little is know of his war record, although Dr. Wesley Ketchum writes in his book "The Discovery of Edgar Cayce", quote, "John C. Latham was Jeff Davis' private secretary." Dr. Ketchum

was not always the most reliable source of information and, as a result, we are not sure that this was the true activity of John C. Latham during the war. There has been considerable speculation over the years as to where Latham obtained the finances to start his successful business career. One of the most often mentioned possibilities would give some credence to Dr. Ketchum's statement.

It is known that when Lee surrendered to Grant that Jefferson Davis and certain other Confederate government officials set out for Mexico in a wagon train carrying papers and documents relating to the Confederacy. It has been reliably substantiated that when they passed through Danville, Virginia that the caravan was carrying \$6,000,000.00 in Confederate gold. However, when Davis and his group were captured at Washington, Georgia the gold was nowhere to be found. Many attempts over the years to locate the gold have failed to yield a clue as to its fate. Needless to say, many believe that the gold was divided among the entourage somewhere enroute and although no record exists of the fact that Latham was among this group many of that day insisted that his financial start came from his share of the Confederate gold. We do know that Latham had a lifelong affinity for Kentucky and Kentuckians and here was a 17 year-old private from Kentucky born in Christian County in 1844, just as was Jefferson Davis in 1808. (In 1818 the line between Christian and Todd County was changed so as to put the Davis homestead in Todd County). We will perhaps never know if there was an association between the two, Davis and Latham, but the possibility affords us an opportunity to speculate thereon.

After the war, Latham returned to Hopkinsville and for three years was engaged in the drygoods business as was his father earlier and his brother Charles Latham. Around 1870, he went to Memphis where he obtained a position in a cotton brokerage firm, laying the foundation for his later success. While in Memphis, he met and married Miss Mary Allen, the daughter of Thomas H. Allen of Memphis. Mr. Allen was a commission merchant and banker and was an individual of considerable means. An interesting sidelight on the wedding was the attendance at the ceremony of Mrs. Jefferson Davis. The Davis' at the time were living in Memphis and could very well have been friends of the Allen's as well. But then there is also the possibility of the connection having stemmed from Latham's Civil War service.

Soon after the marriage the young couple moved to New York City where John C. Latham became associated with H. E. Alexander. Mr. Alexander was a native of Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The records of the New York Stock Exchange show that Mr. Alexander became a member of the New York Stock Exchange on May 1, 1869. The record shows that the firm name of Latham, Alexander and Company existed prior to 1876. At that time the firm consisted of Latham, Alexander, Robert F. Smith, and R. P. Slater, all general partners and G. C. Miller a special partner. On February 28, 1885 the membership of Mr. Alexander was transferred to John C. Latham. G. C. Miller and R. F. Smith retired from the partnership in April, 1885. R. P. Slater retired on December 31, 1889. Mr. Alexander retired February 11, 1895 leaving Latham as the exchange partner and Charles Fraser who had joined the firm in January 1893 as the only other partner. This association continued until Mr. Latham's death on August 18, 1909 when the firm was dissolved. Latham, Alexander and Company were bankers and commission merchants and in addition to being a member firm of The New York Stock Exchange were also members of the the New York Cotton Exchange.

So in 1874 John C. Latham launched himself into the financial circles of New York City. Further speculation as to where a young man of 30 years of age could obtain the finances for such an endeavor leads us to believe that he probably had the ^{BANKING} banking of both his banker father and his commission merchant and banker father-in-law.

Latham, Alexander and Company were probably not the largest firm in their field but it is known that they were highly respected in the brokerage and banking industry. In 1886 we have a hardback volume with an introduction in script which they evidently sent to their clients giving the movements and fluctuations of the cotton market for the year and the trends and fluctuations for a period of time back before the Civil War.

From the time he arrived in New York until his death in 1909 Mr. Latham was the benefactor of every worthy cause of which he had knowledge in Hopkinsville and Christian County. He invested his money in a number of ^{BUSINESS} business enterprises in the community and gave much more to worthy causes. It was almost as if he had an obsession to do for his hometown. It is unfortunate that there is no complete record of the services and gifts which he made to local causes.

However, I wish to break down the list into two parts -- first, those business ventures which he entered to promote the commerce of the city and hopefully from which he would realize a reasonable profit.

One.

He early saw the need for a system of good roads to serve the commerce of the town. He supported the organization of a company which ultimately built 40 miles of turnpikes. Of the \$200,000.00 required to build this system of toll roads he personally subscribed to \$50,000.00

and then actively worked to sell the balance of the bonds. Several years later he supported a movement by the county to free the roads of toll and donated his \$50,000.00 worth of bonds to the county. This enabled the fiscal court to issue their own bonds and to retire the indebtedness with the proceeds. I have often heard the statement made that Hopkinsville has more state and federal highways coming into the city than any other town in Kentucky with the exception of Lexington. We can thank Mr. Latham for many of these roads for it was through his foresight and interest that many of these were built.

The tobacco market in Hopkinsville owes its start to this remarkable man. He built the first warehouse in Hopkinsville on the present site of Peace Park. It covered the entire block, cost \$40,000.00, and was so successful that it was not many years until many more such warehouses were constructed which eventually led to Hopkinsville being known as the largest dark fired tobacco market in the world. Mr. Latham continued to operate this warehouse until it was burned in 1907 by the nightriders. He then offered to give the lot to the Methodist Church, which was then located on the corner of 9th and Clay Streets where Bill Beliles Furniture Store now is. Although the site was not exactly what the Methodist's desired due to its proximity to the railroad they agreed to accept it. However, his wife, Elsie Gaylord Latham, whom he had married after the death of his first wife in 1900, refused to sign the deed. As a result, he wrote the church a check for \$7,000.00 with which they purchased the lot where the present First Methodist Church stands at 13th and Main.

Although the Latham name is associated with many causes and places such as the Latham Parks, Latham Avenue, Latham Poor Fund, Latham Cottages, Latham Mausoleum, his support toward the building of the long since fire-destroyed Hotel Latham has to be classified as probably the most visible evidence of this man's love for his Kentucky hometown. In 1893, a stock company was formed in Hopkinsville for the purpose of building a hotel. Mr. Latham was one of the principal stockholders in the corporation, held a large amount of the bonds on the building, and supplied the money with which to furnish the hotel once it was completed. The hotel structure cost \$104,000. However, his enthusiasm for his hometown and its progress overcame his best business judgement. The hotel was known as the finest of its size in the south (120 rooms and 60 baths). It was a magnificent structure and rumor had it that the noted architect Stanford White was the consultant in its design. The hotel was operated on an elaborate scale with French chefs and a manager who personally greeted all important guests with champagne "on the house". As a result, it lost money and in 1898 just three years after its gala opening in 1895 the creditors foreclosed and Mr. Latham bought the structure for \$15,500.00 in addition to the bonds of approximately \$50,000.00 which he held. He spent \$15,000.00 in repairs and leased the hotel to various operators, the last being A. D. Noe who was operating it at the time of Mr. Latham's death. In 1911, A. D. Noe and Son purchased the hotel from Mrs. Latham for \$40,000.00. Again, he had made a contribution to his home town.

Before moving on to a list of his philanthropies we wish to mention briefly his construction in the 1890's of the three Latham Cottages, two of which still stand, facing Virginia Park between 8th and 9th Streets on Campbell. These structures are purported to have been the first structures in the city to have running water. One of these cottages

was torn down in 1962 and in the process the wreckers discovered a large water storage tank built into the attic. The tank furnished the water for the house prior to the days of the city water system.

Much of Mr. Latham's generosity was directed toward the churches of the community. In addition to his gift to the Methodist Church, it is known that he was generous in his support of the First Baptist Church, since his father's family were all Baptists. However, it would appear that his church, Grace Episcopal, the church of his mother's family, received more than any other. The window of Saint Cornelia in the present church was a gift from him as was the present organ. In addition, by the terms of his will he left \$50,000 to the church, the income from which was to be used for general church purposes. This bequest along with several other bequests from other donors is now held in a co-mingled trust at First City Bank and Trust Company. The investment of the funds is left by terms of the trust to the bank at the direction of the Senior Warden, Junior Warden, and treasurer of the Church.

Mr. Latham's generosity is much in evidence today as we look at Riverside Cemetery. Shortly after the new cemetery opened in 1886 Mr. Latham visited it and noticed its lack of design in landscaping. Upon his return to New York he wrote the city outlining his views and enclosed his check for \$1,500 to which the city added \$500.00, with this the city employed H. Hensplanter, a landscape architect from Louisville. It is his design which accounts for the layout of the present cemetery. His original map is still in the files at city hall.

On the same trip he visited the Civil War cemetery located behind

what is now Attucks Middle School and which has been in the news during the past few months because of its alleged infestation by snakes. Even then, Mr. Latham saw the ~~concept~~^{MAUSOLEUM} and neglected graves of many confederate soldiers. The Union troops buried there had been removed to the cemetery at Ft. Donelson. He supplied the funds to move the 101 soldiers to the new cemetery. They were buried in three graves and then he erected the Confederate Monument which stands today in Riverside. The shaft, constructed of Maine granite cost Mr. Latham over \$20,000.00. The monument was made at the Hallowell Granite Works in Maine. The structure is 37 feet high and on the southern panel is the following inscription:

"This monument is erected at the place of his
birth by a surviving comrade to commemorate
the virtues of the confederate dead"

A. D. 1887

It is purported that on May 19, 1887 when the monument was dedicated that over 20,000 people attended. Special trains came in for the occasion. Stores closed and a holiday spirit prevailed. A gigantic parade preceded the unveiling. Principal addresses were made by Rev. Charles F. Deems, Pastor of the Church of the Strangers, New York City and by Congressman W. C. P. Breckenridge of Ashland, Kentucky. Reporters were on hand from the Louisville Courier Journal, Evansville Journal, The Nashville American, in addition to The New York Times, Atlanta Constitution, and the St. Louis Globe Democrat. Mr. Latham did not attend but he managed to see that a complete account found its way into all the papers of the South and that his cotton brokerage and banking business did not suffer.

The Latham Mausoleum was built in the early years of this century

at a cost of some \$50,000.00. The walls are of Main Granite and the interior is finished in Vermont marble. The doors are solid bronze and the only window is a Tiffany production. Only six bodies repose in the edifice. John C. Latham, Sr., Virginia Glass Latham, his mother and father, his sister Rebecca Latham, his brother Charles M. Latham, his son John C. Latham III, and John C. Latham, Jr.

Having been a military man himself he was most generous to the local militia company and outfitted them completely and furnished their armory. This body was known as the Latham Light Guards until its induction into the federal service during the Spanish-American War.

He donated the gymnasium to the local Y. M. C. A. when it was constructed and was instrumental in obtaining the first free standing library, the old Carnegie Library.

In addition to the above listed objects of his generosity by the terms of his will dated June 18, 1909, he left the following bequests:

- Family homestead, to be converted to a public park
named Virginia Park in honor of his mother — valuation \$30,000.00
- Lot on Ninth Street between L & N Railroad and Campbell to be used
as a public park named Peace Park — valuation 20,000.00
- Cash for Beautifying Virginia Park 20,000.00
- Cash for Beautifying Peace Park 10,000.00
- Trust Fund for Worthy Poor of Hopkinsville 50,000.00
- Trust Fund for Grace Church 50,000.00
- Charles H. Hisgen — Caretaker 5,000.00
- James Lee, Gardner 1,000.00
- Miss Jennie Glass — Cousin 25,000.00
- Trust Fund for Maintenance of Family

Mausoleum

5,000.00
216,000.00

No one ever recorded the fact that Mr. Latham failed to respond to any call from his hometown or its citizens. Such was in evidence during the gold panic of 1907 when Mr. W. T. Tandy, President of The City Bank, wrote Mr. Latham that while the banks of Hopkinsville were in no difficulty, that he would feel much better if the local gold reserve was increased. Upon receipt of this message, Mr. Latham wired Mr. Tandy that he was shipping \$25,000.00 in gold by express.

During all the years Mr. Latham lived in New York he always spent a part of each summer at the Latham homestead in Hopkinsville. After the death of his mother he maintained the home as a summer home and continued his annual visits. He always worked on the place, its grounds, and buildings. He usually had the house painted whether it needed it or not. He improved the home until it was a showplace. In the summer of 1907 he had the wooden fence torn down and constructed the stone and iron fence which surrounds Virginia Park today.

It is usually the case that such men are highly colorful characters and their memory is enriched by a wealth of unique stories. Research into this aspect of the man failed to reveal such a nature. He was rather a staid, dignified character. It is said that he was a tall man of medium build who walked with a military bearing. He made few friends, was rather reserved in his speech, and was rather lacking in a sense of humor. He was a firm and loyal friend to those with whom he was associated — passing on to them any market tips which in his judgement he thought would be beneficial to them.

It was not infrequent during his vacation visits that he would relax

with his friends and partake liberally of liquid refreshment. The story is told that upon one occasion he gave an elaborate reception for his friends and without the servants knowledge he supplied the punch bowl with a liberal amount of champagne. Along late in the evening a Mrs. McKenzie, who had taught the first grade at Clay Street School for many years, having made a number of trips to the punch bowl, rushed up and taking him in her arms exclaimed, "John, that is the finest lemonade I ever drank." Reports of the party classified it as a howling success.

Mr. Latham and his first wife had no children, but upon his marriage to Elsie Gaylord of Loudville he had ^{two} ~~two~~ children. The first a boy, John C. Latham III died at the age of 2½. The second a daughter, Alice, survived him and died only a few years ago.

Mr. Latham died quite suddenly at 4:00 a.m. August 18, 1909 in his suite at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. The New Era of Monday, August 23, 1909 carries the following headlines:

"Body of City's Benefactor is Buried

Great assemblage of citizens pay sincere and sorrowful tribute of respect to Mr. Latham's memory.

Simple and solemn service held at Grace Church and remains are placed in mausoleum in Riverside Cemetery -- Beautiful and innumerable floral designs attest the affection of greiving friends."

It is recorded that over 3,000 persons attended the funeral at the cemetery on Sunday, August 22, 1909. Someone recorded that there were 342 vehicles in the procession.

It is a sad commentary on the life of a man who contributed so much to his hometown that within thirty days, his widow, Mrs. Elsie Gaylord Latham, many years his junior, filed suit to break the will and for the next three years the matter was in the courts. It cost the city a considerable sum to fight the suit and the case was finally compromised whereby the city accepted a reduction in the amount of the poor fund from \$50,000 to \$26,000.00. In the meantime, Mrs. Latham also filed suit against the city for damages in the loss of the property burned by the Night Riders. In this, she was not successful. She nor her daughter, Alice Latham, exhibited nothing but hostility toward the town and its citizenry as long as they lived. William Turner relates that in doing the research on his paper on the Latham Hotel he wrote Alice, then living in New York state, and she never bothered to reply.

Christian County and Hopkinsville have been remembered in lasting ways by many — among those are Mr. Wilgers^{us} who left the three playgrounds, Dr. Stuart who by his bequest Jennie Stuart Hospital was constructed, and more recently the Tandy bequest to the Hopkinsville-Christian County Library. However, no one individual living or dead ever contributed so much to the business and cultural segments of Hopkinsville and Christian County. I am sure that as he pondered his bequests as written in his will just two months prior to his death, he envisioned two beautiful parks to be maintained and enjoyed by future generations. He asked for no recognition of his generosity and concern. He specifically forbid the erection of a fountain^{ALC} in Virginia Park, it being thought by some that he did not want any plaque erected with his name thereon. Although ~~From~~^{From} time to time attempts

are made to restore some semblance of beauty to these two patches of green the parks for the most part are not kept in the manner envisioned by the donor. Few if any shrubs or flowers remain. The structures withstand vandalism only because of the nature of their construction — rubbish and trash litter the grounds — a sad commentary on the memory of John C. Latham, who even in death did not forget his hometown.

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