

## 11/17/2018 Memorial Fountain Dedication – History’s three missions

By Alice-Catherine Carls

- **History as Healing:** As we commemorate the centenary of the end of World War I on November 11, 1918, we still strive to secure the peace that President Woodrow Wilson hoped for in a newly reshaped world. As we commemorate the men and women of Madison County who one hundred years ago fought in unity for peace and freedom, let us continue to strive to achieve unity in our community. During World War I, white and African American soldiers from Madison County fought and died together. African American women of Madison County worked side by side on sewing surgical dressings for the wounded doughboys “over there” on the Western Front. By 1922, the white surgical dressings workers of Madison County had conceived, paid for, and donated the fountain that you see here. Meanwhile the African American women were raising monies to erect their fountain on the southwestern side of the square. Postwar social norms separated the women and prevented racial equality and unity. Perhaps the best way to heal the past is not to throw away the evidence, but to keep it here to remember that this is the way it was, but it is not the way it is now.
- **History as Perseverance :** History is hard to write. On average, only 5% of all historical evidence gathered by humans survives. I rediscovered this truth when researching the fountain’s history. The Bemis archives are all but gone. The wartime Jackson Sun issues have only sporadically survived. The records of the Jackson McClaran Chapter of the American Red Cross were lost during the organization’s latest move. The records of Mother Liberty Church were lost in the 2003 tornado. It was by pure chance that I was able to identify the maker of the fountain, the J.L. Mott Iron Works of New York. The fountain is not mentioned once in the minutes of the Jackson City Council or the Madison County Commission meetings. A definitive list of Madison County soldiers who died in the war may perhaps never be established. And a list of African American surgical dressings workers? Documenting women’s history is particularly difficult because it has to rely on non-traditional records such as letters, family photographs, wills, or women’s associations’ reports and

newsletters. Doing this research felt like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. I am not done yet. But I shall persevere. I need your help: search your attics, talk to your friends and relatives. Review the contents of old cardboard boxes before throwing them away! And by all means, let us write history together!

- History as Community : History can and should bring people together. When we search for the past. And when we build the future. Together. It is not my history or your history; it is our history. Acknowledging and owning our shared past in all its dimensions enables us individually and as a community to move forward. In no small way, this project allowed me to build a “village of helpers:” Jean Shulman, chief archivist for the national American Red Cross – I call her my guiding angel. Dr. Foye Adedokun; Nora and Harbert Alexander; Tom Aud; Fred Birmingham; Katie Brantley; Harrell Carter; Mitch Carter; Sally Dabney; Loni Harris; Joel Jackson; Evelyn Keele; Andy Pouncey, who first noticed the fountain as a war memorial; Steven Raper; Margaret Sipes; and Jack Wood. To all go my deepest thanks for your generous gift of time and advice.
- Acknowledgements : I would like to extend my gratitude to the individuals whose gifts helped finance the fountain’s restoration, as well as to those institutions that have given me the green light and supported me during this two-year effort : the Madison County Commission; the United States World War I Centennial Commission; the Pritzker Military Museum and Library; the Tennessee Great War Commission; the West Tennessee Healthcare Foundation; and the offices of Mayor Jimmy Harris and Mayor Gist. To all go my deepest thanks. Mark R. Harris of Heritage Forge and Wrought Iron used his expertise to triumph over the brittle, one-hundred years old cast iron fountain to produce this beautiful restoration – truly a work of art.
- Remember the tasks of history: history as healing; history as perseverance; and history as community. Thank you.