

Hattiesburg Area Historical Society

HAHS MUSEUM
Hattiesburg Cultural Center
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COME ON IN, AND SEE WHAT DEVELOPS!

In the days before digital and computer enhanced photography, when images slowly emerged on treated papers dunked in the chemical “soup” of darkrooms, the standard joke was, “Come on in, and see what develops!” That should be the greeting on the HAHS Museum door.

Pieces of area history appear in our office daily. They arrive by snail mail, email, telephone, and are carried in by visitors. Where they have been and how they came home is often a story in itself. For example,



Left: Commander L. J. Gulliver, USN salutes the flag standing on the newly repaired deck of the USS Constitution 1931. Right: Timbers from the Tallahala mill selected to refurbish the ship's deck are prepared for shipment in 1928.

for several years museum volunteers have been looking for information on Pine Belt timbers that were used to repair the *USS Constitution*. Was this a fact or just a local myth? What timber was used? From which mill did it come? Where was it used on the ship?

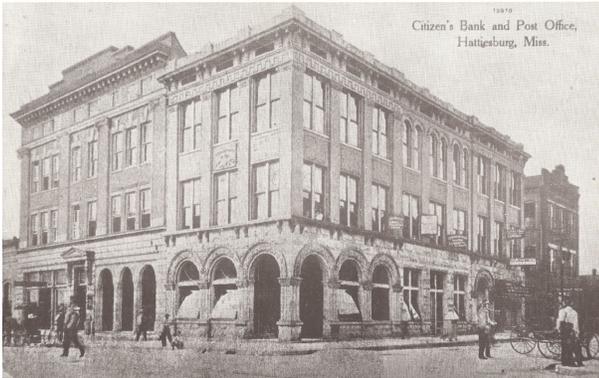
You may know the frigate better as “Old Ironsides.” Originally made of Carolina pine, she

withstood cannon fire from the British man-of-war *Guerrier* in the War of 1812 to earn her nickname. By 1825 the 32 year old ship was considered too old and battered for use and ordered destroyed. Public sentiment aroused by the poem of 21 year old Oliver Wendell Holmes saved her from execution. One hundred years later the *Constitution*, anchored in the Boston Naval Yard, was again in disrepair. School children sent their pennies to help with repairs, and the ship was saved. But what does this have to do with Mississippi pine?

The answer walked in our doors in the hands of Louis Major III. The Major-Sowers Sawmill in Tallahala run by his grandfather (Louis, Sr.) Was selected to provide timber for the decks. Specifications required that the planking be the “best heart pitch pine,” measuring six inches thick, twelve inches wide, and forty feet long. Not only did Mr. Major know that his father had hand selected every board, but he also had the pictures! Although the family sawmill closed in 1929, the pictorial record of the shipment, kept safe by family hands, is now at home in the HAHS museum.

A Citizens Bank etched glass sign is another piece of the past that found its way to our door. James Yelverton arrived with it. Originally it was thought to be one of two signs mounted on the front of the 601 Main Street building (the decorative stone corners are all that remain). However, the glass panel may have actually come from an older building (shown below). The bank was established in 1902 and operated from the Leaf Hotel until 1905. Then it was moved across the street into the building on the corner of Main and Front Streets.

In 1922 the McInnis building was purchased, and the new location became Main and Pine. Photographs of this building



clearly show two black background, gold-leaf lettered signs beside the door. Unfortunately, these signs seem to have no curve to the word Citizens. Although no one living knows for sure where the signs hung, we do know that from 1937 until 1989 Robert Breckenridge, owner of Breck's Sign Shop at 39 Batson Street (later moved to 1015 N Main), regularly cleaned and re-leafed the signs.

Citizens Bank merged until it became Trustmark Bank. The McInnis Building was torn down in 1996. Prior to demolition,

bank officials asked Mr. Breckenridge to remove the signs and dispose of them as he wished. Eventually, he gave the signs to his sons. The sign in our museum (shown above) was given to Darryl, the older of the two.

Darryl and Amanda Breckenridge hung the sign in the glass enclosed porch of their 1860s Creole cottage on Second Street in Pass Christian. Unfortunately, in 2005 Hurricane Katrina damaged the house beyond repair, but the glass sign miraculously survived the onslaught of the wind and storm surge. Mr. and Mrs. Breckenridge have given their sign to the museum and have sent an important piece of downtown Hattiesburg's history home.

It is normal for our museum staff to answer calls and letters requesting information about early area sawmills. We're always looking for something, but we weren't looking for a phone call from Helen McWhorter in North Carolina asking if we had a complete history of the J. J. Newman Lumber Co.

Yes, we had information, but what could we tell the daughter of J. I. Thompson, head of Newman's "safety first and welfare" division. Before panic set in, Mrs. McWhorter explained that she wanted to send us information. She had a booklet that needed to come home.

What arrived in the mail was a treasure titled *NEWMAN!* Names, dates, descriptions, and photographs filled the pages of this reprint from the May 16, 1925 *American Lumberman* article, and they filled gaps in our information. The Newman Lumber Company manufactured southern pine lumber, timbers, lath, shingles, box shooks, and crating. It also provided poplar, gum, and oak. These products were shipped all over the world by the company's export sales office, American Pitch Pine Export Co. of New Orleans, La., U.S.A.



This story could be expanded by relating pitch pine exports to pitch pine decking and explaining that Louis Major, Jr. worked for the Newman Mill after closing his own. Or the influence of one of the largest lumber companies in the country on area banking and economy could be explored. But by now you should get the picture. If you want to know more, come on in (to the HAHS Museum), and see what develops.

Left: Newman virgin pines dwarf man in 1925. Right: Newman dressed long-leaf timbers. Above: J. I. Thompson, head of safety division.

