Setting the Record Straight

Her name comes up again and again in City Commission meetings, letters to the editor and city resolutions favoring beautification. Yet there is curiously little known about Mrs. D.T. (Mary) Dunn, the leader of the Ladies Park Association of Brunswick at the end of the 19th century. There are no photographs or paintings of her available to the public, but her impact is still with us today. Her husband’s biography, penned by an admiring author in 1889, leaves out much of the detail of the couple’s mutual, well-coordinated efforts to preserve the unique beauty of the historic coastal town. It certainly gives her only a passing, cursory and inaccurate mention.

Mary E. Tuthill Dunn was born in a town called Starkey, in Yates County, New York, in 1838. A profile of her husband, David Thompson Dunn, in A Biographical Souvenir of the States of Georgia and Florida, on page 252, states that they were married in 1885, but that is probably incorrect. Mention of Mrs. Dunn as a civic preservation leader appears in city documents as early as 1881. Unless there was a previous Mrs. D.T. Dunn, the biography is off by several years at the very least. Additionally, the 1885 date would have put Mary in her late 40s or early 50s when their only son, Frederick, was born. In David Dunn’s biography published in 1889, it was noted that the only child Mary and he had was deceased; other sources state that the boy lived only one year.

This family tragedy explains the lack of heirs or lineage going forward. However, it can be said of Mrs. Dunn that her legacy was saving one of the two squares in Brunswick that still retain their original shape and size as General James Oglethorpe intended. David Dunn was instrumental in attracting investors from his native New York to Brunswick, to build the magnificent Oglethorpe Hotel (not to be confused with Civil War-era Oglethorpe House). His biography, written shortly before his death in 1890, reads in part as follows:
“In 1869 he came south and located in Brunswick, Ga., and for a number of years was engaged in private banking, but during President Hayes’ administration was appointed deputy revenue collector and filled that position four years. For three years he was United States commissioner and postmaster of Brunswick. He served as a member of the board of aldermen in 1880-81, was elected mayor of Brunswick in 1887, and re-elected in 1888. He took an active part in organizing the Board of Trade in Brunswick, and for the past six years has been president of the Glynn County Agricultural Society; he is also a member of the school board, was instrumental in organizing the fire department and has been connected with the latter for more than fifteen years.”

Preservationists and Pressure

In 1878, the first mention of a group named the Ladies Park Association was recorded in City Commission minutes, closely following a petition by D.T. Dunn to remove the civic buildings in Hanover Square. Although the council approved the motion, no bids were called for or issued to move the buildings or construct their possible replacements. This period of time was the first mention of the Association, which began to circulate petitions to move the project forward.

Two years later, in 1880, the Ladies Park Association was heavily involved in fundraising to purchase materials for beautification of the park space. At the April 1880 commission meeting, the group began to pressure the council with insistent petitions to move the courthouse to Queen’s Square, enclose Hanover Square and “shut up the hogs.” At that point in time, hogs, horses, cattle and other livestock had been allowed to roam freely in Hanover Square, where the city’s market was held. Obviously, the consequences of that practice would have been counterproductive to anyone who desired to transform the space into the garden spot General Oglethorpe envisioned in 1771. The ladies, it appeared, were to be tasked with raising consciousness as well as money. The formal request to move City Hall was sent to committee, which approved it at the next (May 1880) meeting. Despite this ruling, nothing was done to actually remove the structures for the next two years.

Progress—or Destruction?

In 1881, storm clouds began to gather over Hanover Square. Railroads across the nation were in frantic growth mode post-Reconstruction, during the development of transcontinental transportation lines. Brunswick plunged into granting permission to several companies to install tracks around and through the growing city. One route promised to the Macon and Brunswick Railroad proposed to bisect Hanover Square and transform the park into “parkways,” or curtailed, glorified green spaces, on either side of the tracks. Another grim battle ensued between city fathers with possible ties to the profitability of this expansion, and citizens who demanded that Hanover Park be left
intact. The Ladies Park Association, once again, came to the rescue and protested the
decision of the council to allow the construction. This is the first documented mention
of Mary Dunn in the city’s records, which reveals a possible error in the biography of her husband (see above).

David Dunn could not have asked for a better, more effective ally than his wife in
preserving the beauty of Brunswick. Mrs. Dunn and her ladies made such a fuss that the
council resolved in June 1881, after only one month’s time, to revoke its permission for the
project. In fact, so well had Mrs. Dunn and her association pressed their point that the
city became sensitized to any future attempts to confiscate any portion of Hanover
Square for purposes other than civic enjoyment. In 1895, the Committee on Electric Trains, a new trend in municipal transportation at the turn of the 20th century, permanently exempted Hanover Square from future consideration for train lines. That determination was reinforced in 1900 when Hanover Square—only Hanover Square—was perpetually protected from all electric streetcar franchises.

Triumph—Despite the Circumstances

Buoyed by their success in saving Hanover Park from becoming a railroad side yard, the
Ladies Park Association pressed on with another round of urgent petitions in January
1882 for removal of City Hall buildings from the park. This time, Mrs. Dunn’s group
also enlisted the aid of the local newspaper, issuing an editorial appeal to solicit public support. Just one month later, the Brunswick Advertiser and Appeal reported that the
motion had finally been put into action. By February 18, 1882, the estimate of cost for the
project went from an optimistic $50 to the harsh reality of $500 in actual moving costs. Undaunted, the newspaper enthusiastically reported two months later, as spring arrived on the Georgia coast, that work had begun on installing fences and sidewalks in the park.

The Ladies Park Association held title to Hanover Park during the time of the
most vigorous change and improvement. In 1885, they returned the title claim and franchises to the city. Just a year before that time, in 1884, the state chemist had tested the water from the deep artesian well drilled by the city in the middle of the park. It was reported to be full of beneficial minerals, and the city wisely capitalized on that finding by placing an ornate fountain atop the well in 1885. A tourism attraction of sorts was created by this action, which only served to provide another enticement for future developers of the Oglethorpe Hotel, a project in which Mrs. Dunn’s husband was deeply involved.
Mrs. Dunn’s husband was elected to the post of mayor and served two one-year terms before his death at age 57 in 1890. At the time of his passing, David Dunn had successfully steered the city through the complex design and bid process for the new City Hall building. Alfred Eichberg’s plans for a Richardson-Romanesque style building, trimmed in limestone, were accepted and sent out for bid. Mayor Dunn had just completed his final term as the construction contract was awarded to the Anderson and Sharpe firm for $33,000. David Thompson Dunn died before he could see his dream of a dignified and worthy City Hall become a reality.

The construction process for City Hall struggled through a national depression and its inevitable impact on Brunswick in the early 1890s. The economic woes, which included the dismissal of the city’s Parks Keeper and falling behind on the upkeep of the recently renovated Hanover Park, postponed the city’s plans to finish all the proposed improvements on Queen Square as planned. In the interim, the city used a wooden building that had been moved from Hanover Park in 1882, which the city fathers agreed was unsuitable for an emerging municipality of Brunswick’s promise and potential. A market house designated for the lot opposite the site of the new City Hall was left in a state of shambles as building materials sat untouched for months on end. The city finally reimbursed the contractor for the materials, then simply stockpiled them without further progress. But by January 1893, it was noted in City Council minutes that all City Hall functions had been moved to the new building on Queen Square.

What About Mary?
Mary Dunn apparently stayed in Brunswick after her husband’s death. It must have been bittersweet, however, for her to witness the completion of her husband’s hopes and dreams for the city without him. The City Directory of 1892 listed her as a widow in residence at the corner of Richmond and Dartmouth Streets. Although a general location is indicated, there is no house number, as was often the case in small towns where everyone “knew where people lived anyway.” It could have been any of the four corners of those beautiful streets lined with shade trees and historic homes.

Mary Dunn’s husband had been a successful merchant, according to the City Directory. His holdings as D.T. Dunn & Company included an office at 311 and a shop at 314 Newcastle Street. The shop sold a range of merchandise from dry goods, shoes and clothing to a more specific notation for gentlemen’s furnishings. One might reasonably surmise that she was, at least, financially well situated in her widowhood. Mrs. Dunn should have felt a great deal of satisfaction in seeing her greatest wish, the removal of civic buildings, from the park at Hanover Square. Her death is recorded...
in the fall of 1898. Mary Dunn was buried in Oak Grove Cemetery on October 12, 1898, just ten days after a devastating hurricane that hit Brunswick and flooded the city.

Between the two of them, the Dunns were a superpower of sorts for the city of Brunswick. They came along at a time when growth and change threatened to rob the city of its character, if not for the restraining hand of wisdom and foresight. David Dunn provided the economic influence that attracted investors to the city to build what was arguably the most important local tourism development of the century, the Oglethorpe Hotel. His vision of a magnificent civic structure left us with the enduring landmark of the Historic City Hall on Newcastle Street.

Mary Dunn mobilized an influential group of women into veritable warriors of preservation and beautification, leading enviably well-crafted campaigns for public support, while genteelly pressuring a reluctant, procrastinating City Council. She also spearheaded detailed planning for hardscape, landscape and fund raising projects that would span half a decade. Her unshakable determination to fight off the railroads and electric train developers ensured that the city’s most beautiful square still exists as the colonial founders intended. If there are any future monuments erected in Hanover Square, perhaps the Dunns should be considered as the honorees.