

# I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

DRUIDISM was the religious faith of ancient Celtic inhabitants of Gaul and the British Isles. It flourished from the Second Century BC until the Second Century AD and survived until supplanted by Christianity.

The Druids believed in the immortality of the soul and in reincarnation. The functions of priests, religious teachers, judges and civil administrators were performed by Druids. The Druids were well versed in astrology, magic and other mysterious powers. They held the oak tree and mistletoe in great reverence and usually conducted their rituals in oak forests.

It was therefore apropos that the City of Tuscaloosa with its large number of oak trees be referred to as the Druid City or City of Oaks. For many years the name Druid has been used in titles as being synonymous

with Tuscaloosa.

Our local telephone directory includes about 25 Druids in their titles. Among these are:

Druid City Hospital, Druid Drug, Druid Theater, Druid Hills and many others.

The year 1816 appears to be the date of the first mention of Tuscaloosa as a town or a community. My great grandfather, Hiram T. Cochran, came to Tuscaloosa in 1817 from South Carolina. When he arrived the place had little to identify it as a village. The log huts were placed at random without any regard to streets or pattern. It is said that not a single brick, pane of glass or plank could be found in its entirety. The inhabitants were all squatters. The village was full of oak and pine trees with native indians swarming all over the place.

In 1818 Hiram Cochrane returned to South Carolina and brought his family to Tuscaloosa. A son was born just about eight miles out of Tuscaloosa (William Allen Cochrane) and thereby barely escaped being the first white child to be born in Tuscaloosa.

Since the early settlers were squatters and had no title to their land, the town was surveyed and laid out in 1821 by order of the Federal Land Office. The survey was made by Collin Finnell, grandfather of Judge Woolsey Finnell. Hiram Cochrane worked with the surveying party and also in the planting of the oak trees later characterized Tuscaloosa as the City of Oaks or Druid City.

The sale of lots began in the fall of 1821. Choice lots were sold for as low as \$30 each during the original auction.

In the survey of the city, the bank of the Black Warrior River was considered First Street and the remaining streets were parallel with the avenues at right angles to the streets.

The blocks were four chains by five chains (a chain equals 66 feet)

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making each city block contain two acres. Fifth Street (University Blvd.) and 24th Ave. (Greensboro Ave.) were two chains wide while the remaining streets and avenues were one and one-half chains wide. Queen City Ave. was the east margin avenue, 15th St. was the south margin street and 32nd Ave. was the west margin avenue. Since the riverbank was First Street and the river did not run in a true east-west direction the original avenues are not in a true north-south direction (about 10 degrees off) and similarly the streets are not in a true east-west direction. Note how Queen City Ave. (18th Ave.), which is laid off on a north-south section line, intersects 19th, 20th and 21st Avenues before reaching the south margin street (15th St.).

The streets and avenues that were added later beyond the margin streets and avenues were in general laid off with deference to compass north.

William Allen Cochrane, son of Hiram P. Cochrane, entered the Uni-

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versity of Alabama on its opening day in 1831 and was the 19th to matriculate. After graduation he rode on horseback to the University of Pennsylvania where he pursued a medical course and graduated as an M.D. He returned to Tuscaloosa and practiced medicine and also served as a trustee of the University of Alabama and was its secretary for a number of years. Although not in the Confederate Army, he went to Vicksburg to aid the besieged Confederate troops who were badly in need of medical attention. At the Battle of Vicksburg the Confederate troops, reduced to starvation rations, surrendered on July 4, 1863.

When General Croxton reached Tuscaloosa in the spring of 1865 there was a skirmish at the top of River Hill with the University of Alabama cadets. Years later I was shown a bullet hole in the baseboard of the fence around my grandmother's front yard (where the County Court House

now stands) where a mini-ball from a federal rifle had struck. General Croxton proceeded to the University and burned it to the ground.

As the Yankees were ransacking the city one soldier took Dr. William A. Cochrane's horse.

"I don't reckon you'll take a doctor's only means of transportation?" he asked. The soldier replied, "I just reckon I will" as he rode away.

The majestic oaks that in earlier days characterized the City of Tuscaloosa as the City of Oaks-the Druid City are now rapidly becoming depleted in great numbers and unless some plan of orderly replacement is inaugurated the city stands to lose much of its beauty, heritage and prestige.