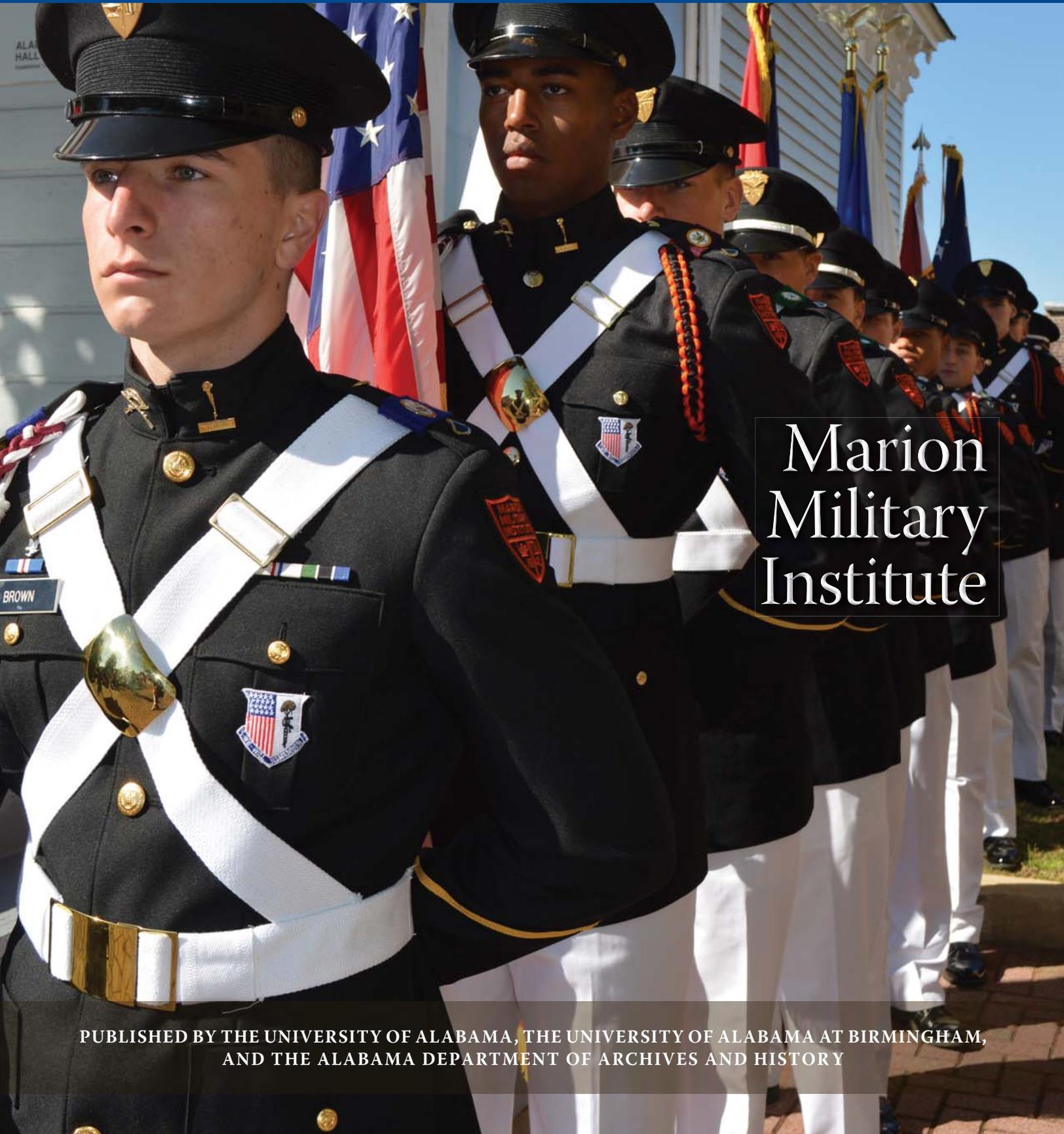


Alabama Heritage



Marion
Military
Institute

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM,
AND THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

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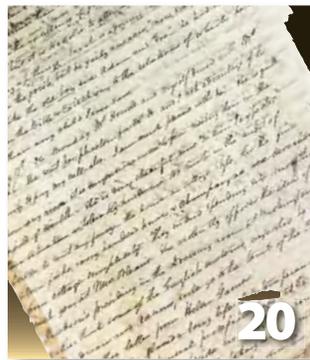
BY CAROLYN M. BARSKE

In 1818 the Cypress Land Company held the first auction for land in a new town on the banks of the Tennessee River in northwest Alabama.

Since then, Florence has grown into a thriving community with strong educational, agricultural, and industrial roots.



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SARAH GAYLE AND VIOLENCE IN THE OLD SOUTHWEST

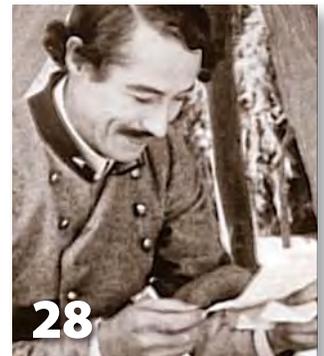
BY SARAH WOOLFOLK WIGGINS

An early nineteenth-century journal illuminates the dangers facing those who lived in Alabama during its earliest years as a state.

ALABAMA'S OWN HENRY B. WALTHALL

BY JOANNA JACOBS

For a brief moment toward the beginning of the motion picture industry, one of the biggest stars in the world was a slight, refined, serious-looking farmer's son from central Alabama.



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MARION MILITARY INSTITUTE: THE MILITARY COLLEGE OF ALABAMA

BY JOSEPH W. ("BILL") MATHEWS JR.

The history of Marion Military Institute was profoundly shaped by a single family—the Murfees.

Alabama Women

THE CRUSADE OF “MRS. MOSES”: IDA MATHIS AND THE COTTON CRISIS OF 1914

BY REBECCA MONTGOMERY

A person encountering Ida Mathis in Birmingham in the early 1900s would not have guessed that she would soon be labeled the savior of the Alabama economy. A matronly figure with a kind face, she did not resemble the “economic Moses of the South” or “Joan of Arc of agriculture,” though contemporary periodicals called her both. Today, her alliance with bankers and businessmen appears to have little in common with the usual approach of Progressive Era women, who drew upon their authority as mothers when pressing for social reforms. In both cases observers would be fooled. Although Mathis took an unusual approach in presenting herself as a practical farmer and businesswoman, she adopted a distinctly feminine strategy in striving for a sense of family among all community members. When the cotton market’s collapse threw the state into economic depression in 1914, she worked to convince businessmen, farmers, and urban consumers that they had a direct stake in one another’s success. Her sincerity, speaking skills, and sound financial advice drew national attention and laid the groundwork for the state’s increased food production during World War I.

Mathis came from an unlikely background for an agricultural reformer. Born Ida Elizabeth Brandon in 1856, she grew up in Florence, in Lauderdale County, where she attended the Florence Synodical Female College. Although it was unusual for southern women to have college degrees, she earned a Master’s degree and taught for several years before marrying Giles Huffman Mathis. She and her husband moved to Gadsden in Etowah County and eventually had three children.

When Mathis invested her inheritance in land, her life took a nontraditional turn. Against the advice of her husband and friends, she purchased “worn-out farms,” farms that had been operated by tenants who grew cotton year



after year and exhausted the soil. Mathis found Alabama’s method of cotton production irrational and set about identifying better methods. She investigated the best ways to restore the land’s fertility and forced her tenants to sign contracts requiring them to follow her plans. In her first venture, she bought a farm of about a thousand acres for eight dollars an acre and sold it six years later for forty dollars an acre. She then repeated the process on other tracts.

While Mathis enjoyed earning profits from rehabilitating properties, she had larger concerns. Before the Civil



Opposite page: Ida Mathis used her knowledge of agriculture and the force of her personality to educate Alabama’s poor farmers on the dangers of overreliance on cotton farming. (*The Outlook*) Above: Landowners forced their tenant farmers and sharecroppers to cultivate cotton even at the expense of growing food for their families. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

War, small farmers commonly practiced safety-first farming, meeting their households’ basic food and feed needs before growing cash crops. A post-war cash shortage crippled southern farmers’ ability to continue this practice, and many farmers purchased goods from local merchants on credit. Merchants often accepted only cotton crops as collateral, which encouraged farmers to devote resources to cotton. This was bad for the South—more dollars left the region as it became dependent on northern and western states for food and feed—and for farmers—merchants

charged higher prices and exorbitant interest rates to customers buying on credit. When cotton prices plummeted, farmers had no choice but to go deeper in debt, resulting in persistent rural poverty and an average income among Alabama farmers of around \$325 per year. Mathis addressed these problems by requiring that her tenants practice safety-first farming, providing for family needs first and growing cotton only as a “surplus cash crop.” She also had them cultivate fall cover crops after the cotton harvest—legumes that would restore fertility to the land—and food crops that could be produced year-round in Alabama’s temperate climate. She proved that self-sufficiency was feasible and that diversified small farms could be profitable enterprises.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 precipitated Mathis’s emergence as a public figure. The beginning of WWI sparked global concerns about the interruption of



This black tenant farmer's cabin, inhabited when this photograph was taken in Lee County, c. 1915, demonstrates the poverty of Alabama's farming poor, who lived their lives subject to the whims of the cotton market. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

trade, causing cotton prices to drop dramatically. By November it sold for seven cents per pound, 40 percent less than its value the previous year. Alabama's bankers panicked, as they had extended credit to merchants and farmers based on the projected value of the next harvest. At the annual meeting of the Alabama Bankers' Association the following May, at Birmingham's Tutwiler Hotel, Mathis presented her formula for economic recovery. Impressed by her common-sense approach, the bankers created an agricultural committee and hired Mathis as its field agent. They resolved to extend credit only to farmers who shifted half of their cotton acreage to food production, and they expected Mathis to convince cotton growers that diversification was desirable. With the financial support of bankers and the state department of agriculture, she toured the counties of Alabama for the next twelve months, making up to five speeches per day to promote safety-first farming and increased production of food crops and livestock. After the United States entered the war in 1917, food production for American allies became part of the win-the-war effort, and Mathis continued her work as a field agent, though under the employment of the State Council of Defense.

Mathis played a key role in turning around the state economy even prior to the stimulus of war production,

because she brought the people of Alabama a message of hope in a time of desperation. She convinced farmers that she genuinely cared and that her plan would work, and she was relentless in her efforts to convince townspeople that they should take an interest in the problems of the rural poor. She personally took her tenant farmers to local banks, using her influence as a prosperous property owner to get them loans on reasonable terms. One of her favorite stories was how she convinced a women's club to take out a personal bank loan to purchase canning supplies for a girls' tomato club, then pressured reluctant merchants to sell the canned tomatoes in their stores. The initial loan of several hundred dollars produced more than \$6,000 worth of canned tomatoes, which put dollars in the hands of

rural girls and their families to spend in local businesses. The obvious moral of the tale was that cooperation paid off—everyone benefitted from rural prosperity.

Mathis herself was clearly changed by her experiences. Although her work on agriculture was prescient, her attitudes about other issues, including race and class, reflected the dominant beliefs of her era. In early speeches at bankers' conventions, she spoke of her black and white tenant farmers in patronizing terms, depicting them as lazy drunkards in dire need of guidance. But as she toured the state day after day meeting with poverty-stricken farmers, she increasingly spoke of them in respectful terms, acknowledging their sincere desire for a better life. When the federal government assumed responsibility for agricultural production during the war, officials found that Alabama farmers had shifted to food crops much more quickly than farmers in other southern states due to Mathis's leadership. Her solutions were not unique, but she explained everything in plain words with reassurance and concern. For that they loved her, and the state's agriculture and economy benefitted from that affection.

Rebecca Montgomery is associate professor and director of graduate studies in the history department at Texas State University. Joshua D. Rothman, standing editor of the "Alabama Women" department of Alabama Heritage, is professor of history at the University of Alabama and director of the university's Frances S. Summersell Center for the Study of the South, which sponsors this department.

Alabama Heritage

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