

Alabama Business Hall of Fame





Prime Movers

This is the first in a quarterly series of profiles featuring members of the Alabama Business Hall of Fame — pivotal personalities in Alabama's commerce, community and history.

By Nedra Bloom / Photos by Caroline Baird Summers

THE ALABAMA BUSINESS HALL OF FAME honors those who “have lived a rich life, not a life of wealth,” says J. Barry Mason, dean of the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration at the University of Alabama. Inductees range from iconic Alabamians like George Washington Carver and Daniel Pratt to modern leaders of Alabama's burgeoning technology industries like Roy Nichols.

The first of its kind — now replicated in many states — the Hall of Fame was created in 1973 “to call attention to the good that the private sector can do,” Mason says. Selection requirements focus not only on success in the corporate arena, “but also on having lived an exemplary life, with evidence of social responsibility and a significant commitment to one's community. It's our way of paying tribute to a life well lived.”

Each year, the Hall of Fame solicits nominations from around the state, asking for suggestions from all prior inductees to the hall and from influential residents not only of the state's major cities, but also small towns and rural areas.

“To be eligible for selection,” the Hall of Fame standards say, “a person must have made a significant impact on the development of the state by promoting the free enterprise system and entrepreneurship, by

demonstrating civic leadership, and by their philanthropy and humanitarianism toward their fellow citizens.”

Nominees must be older than 55 or have been retired for at least three years, but they do not need to be University of Alabama alumni, nor even college graduates at all.

Typically, that first step yields a list of about 60 individuals from all over the state and from all kinds of industry, Mason says.

Next, the nominating committee meets. This group includes individuals who are “mature, corporate leaders with insights into the individuals who are being nominated,” Mason explains. The nominating committee whittles the list of 60 to a group of 10 or 12 for further consideration.



J. Barry Mason

Finally, the selection committee, a group of 12 members of the college's Board of Visitors, picks four or five individuals for induction into the Hall of Fame. Those who are nominated but not selected stay in the pool for five years for reconsideration. Those who are chosen are inducted at a formal dinner on the university campus featuring a nationally prominent speaker.

Members of the Hall of Fame don't have to hail from Alabama and they don't have to have made their mark exclusively in Alabama, but each member has strong ties here. Consider Hugh Franklin Culverhouse, who made a name as owner of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers but whose philanthropy toward the University earned the distinction of having the business school bear his name.

Mason takes great pleasure in working with the Hall of Fame, particularly “the affirmation that people who are in positions of high importance in business very often have a high social conscience. You would see them involved in environmental preservation long before it was a popular cause, in major fundraising for hospitals, showing commitment to education.

“These people lead by example and signal to their employees and others that there are many things that really go beyond money.”

Up from Eighth Avenue

JOSEPH AND ANGELO BRUNO



IT'S AN ICONIC STORY OF BUSINESS SUCCESS. Joseph Bruno, the eldest of six boys born in Birmingham as the children of Sicilian immigrants, went to work in a supermarket when he was 12, to supplement the family income.

When the grocery store owner was too ill to continue operating the store, Joe Bruno gathered his family's savings, \$600, and bought the store at Eighth Avenue North and 10th Street in Birmingham — tiny by modern standards. His younger brothers joined him in the enterprise, and together they built a chain of stores and subsidiary businesses — Food World, Big B Discount Drug and more — stretching across the Southeast.

From the original store in 1939, they grew to four stores by 1952, incorporated and rented a warehouse to facilitate volume

purchasing.

By the time the family sold the business in 1995, they had 250 stores doing \$3 billion in annual sales, says Angelo's son Ronald, now owner of the Bruno Event Team, a sports marketing firm in Birmingham.

All six brothers — Joe, Sam, Lee, Ben, Angelo and Anthony — worked in the family business, says Ronald, who did his first tour in the grocery store around age 14. The brothers worked hard, he says, each with his own specialty niche, enabling them to expand. Angelo, for instance, delivered handbills for the store after school.

Ronald credits the firm's success to hard work and customer service. "We believed in taking care of the customer, whatever it took."

Said Joseph Bruno, "You can't stand still, and you can never stop dreaming." The philosophy was constantly in practice, Ronald says. "Growth was our mantra."

The family and business suffered a dev-

astating loss in 1991 when the corporate jet crashed, killing brothers Angelo and Lee, along with seven other members of the firm's management, and the family sold the business in 1995. Joseph Bruno died in 1996.

The Bruno family name extended far beyond the supermarket chain.

The family enabled development of the Neuroscience Intensive Care Unit at UAB Medical Center, and the business library and computer center at the University of Alabama are named in Angelo's honor.

The family's charitable foundation is named in honor of Joseph, though he always said that the credit belonged to God and the entire family. Joseph is quoted on the foundation website about his reason for charitable giving: "I cannot afford to not give." His interests included St. Vincent's Hospital, United Way, the American Cancer Society and the Salvation Army.

TOP LEFT: Angelo Bruno BOTTOM LEFT: Joe Bruno TOP RIGHT: The interior of the first Bruno's store. Photo reprinted by permission of the Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts 829.313



Birmingham Baron

GEORGE GORDON CRAWFORD



“IRON BARON, CIVIC LEADER AND HUMANITARIAN, GEORGE GORDON CRAWFORD was one of the driving forces in developing industry in the South,” reads the Crawford citation for the Alabama Business Hall of Fame.

A Georgia native, Crawford earned a degree in mechanical engineering at Georgia School of Technology in 1890 and studied chemistry in Germany before returning home to work in the steel industry.

He worked for Sloss Iron and Steel Co., Carnegie Steel Co. and the National

Tube Co., before the 1901 merger that created the nation’s first billion-dollar company, United States Steel.

Crawford became manager of the national department of National Tube, one of United States Steel’s largest plants and then became president of Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Co. (TCI).

U.S. Steel’s acquisition of TCI, reports the Encyclopedia of Alabama, always has been an enigma for historians, who debated “whether the takeover salvaged TCI and brought needed resources, or if it held back Southern economic development” through pricing surcharges designed to keep the Southern product from undercutting Northern product.

When Crawford arrived as president, he learned that TCI had withered during the 1907 financial panic, shutting down furnaces, halting expansion and closing mines. Crawford led TCI for more than two decades, expanding and improving operations throughout his tenure.

The Alabama operation was short on manpower and dealing with high turnover and absenteeism, when Crawford arrived.

His response was “an experiment in welfare capitalism,” according to a dissertation by Marlene Hunt Rickard. Crawford instituted pensions, safety and sanitary improvements, health, recreation and educational opportunities for workers, bringing in social workers and health leaders to develop the program. Some criticized the program as paternalistic or motivated by anti-union sentiments, but the program solved many of Crawford’s employment issues, reducing turnover from 400 percent to 5 percent.

Crawford was hired away from TCI by Pittsburg giant Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp. and worked there until shortly before his death in 1936.

Crawford also was instrumental in promoting the Alabama State Fair and the forestry industry.

He served on the Alabama State Harbor Commission and was the first chairman of the Alabama State Docks at Mobile.

He was named Alabama’s outstanding business leader by the Living Hall of Fame in 1925 and called “Alabama’s First Citizen.”

TOP LEFT: The TCI Steel Plant. Photo reprinted by permission of the Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts 918.5.

TOP RIGHT: The Ensley Furnace. Photo reprinted by permission of the Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts 1556.12.77.

BOTTOM LEFT: George Crawford

Torts, Florida Real Estate and the NFL



HUGH FRANKLIN CULVERHOUSE

and created the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

When Culverhouse died in 1994, the St. Petersburg Times cited Forbes magazine, which listed him as “one of the nation’s wealthiest men, with an estimated worth of \$360 million.”

He served on the boards of directors for TimeWarner, Penn Central and Chiquita Brands International, was part of the Florida Council of 100 and a director of the PGA tour. President Gerald Ford named him U.S. Ambassador to the 1976 Winter Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria.

Culverhouse was widely recognized for

his generosity to arts, particularly the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, health and child care-related causes and educational institutions. He endowed chairs at the University of South Florida, the Stetson University College of Law, the University of Florida College of Law and Jacksonville University. The School of Commerce and Business Administration at the University of Alabama is named in his honor. He was the first recipient of the Florida Enterprise Medal in 1984 and received The Champions of Higher Education in Florida Award.

LAW AND LAND LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR THE FORTUNES OF HUGH FRANKLIN CULVERHOUSE

SR. He turned that basis to fun and philanthropy as the first owner of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and a generous supporter of community causes.

Born in Birmingham, Culverhouse earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Alabama and served in the Army Air Force during World War II, before returning to Tuscaloosa for a law degree.

He worked as an assistant attorney general in Alabama in the late 1940s and then went back in the service during the Korean War, before settling down to practice law in Jacksonville, Fla. and moving to Tampa as senior member of the firm of Culverhouse & Botts.

In addition to practicing law, Culverhouse became involved with Florida savings and loans and real estate, including citrus plantations and the 10,000-acre Palmer Ranch planned development in Sarasota County.

In 1974, he was awarded a franchise for a National Football League expansion team

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MILDRED WESTERVELT WARNER GREW UP MAKING PAPER.

In childhood, she watched her father manage the family business. She worked alongside him as a young adult, and, at the peak of her 20 years in the business, became the only woman to preside over a major integrated paper company.

"She was a woman ahead of her time," says granddaughter Liz Obradovich of Tuscaloosa. "There just weren't many female executives in the 1920s and 30s."

Warner's father, Herbert Westervelt, founded the family company, E-Z Opener Bag Co., based on the now common gro-

MILDRED WESTERVELT WARNER

cery bag designed with a trifold crease at the bottom, for easy opening. By 1950, nearly one of every five grocery bags in the nation came from the company, renamed Gulf States Paper Corp. In recent years the company changed its name again, to the Westervelt Co.

After attending junior college, Mildred toured the Orient, married municipal judge Herbert David Warner in 1915 and then began to work as an assistant to her father.

When the company was renamed Gulf States in 1929, Warner took more responsibility, helping guide the company through the Depression. When her father died in 1938, she succeeded her father as head of the company.

Warner tried to encompass four virtues — "patience, faith, vision and determination," Obradovich says.

She demonstrated a vision for the environment long before it was a popular cause, Obradovich says. Warner started a forestry organization and, in the 1950s built Westervelt Lodge at Aliceville, a site dedicated to wildlife management and

forestry programs. A staunch believer in sustainable forestry, the firm managed its own seedling nurseries.

Warner developed a healthy skepticism about traditional investments during the Depression, and that helped steer her to invest in art and antiques. Her collection formed the basis for the Westervelt-Warner Museum of Art in Tuscaloosa.

Warner also was active in church and civic affairs. After the death of her son, David, in a swimming accident, she helped build the Queen City Pool and two YMCAs to make sure young people had water safety education. She also created a foundation in his honor that has grown into the Community Foundation of West Alabama and continues to have support from the Westervelt Co. Warner was a benefactor of the University of Alabama, Stillman College, Auburn University, as well as orphanages, libraries and scouting, Obradovich says. One of her proudest local accomplishments was helping to restore the old governor's mansion into the present-day University Club in Tuscaloosa.

TOP LEFT: Mildred Westervelt Warner at a YMCA groundbreaking ceremony in Tuscaloosa. MIDDLE: On her wedding day. RIGHT: At her office desk. BOTTOM LEFT: Mildred Westervelt Warner

Banker and Barrier Breaker

LOUIS WILLIE, JR



ONE OF ALABAMA'S MOST PROMINENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN BUSINESSMEN, LOUIS WILLIE, JR. made his mark in insurance and banking and used his prominence to help break down racial barriers.

Born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1923, Willie studied economics at Wiley College, before joining the military for service during World War II. After his discharge, he earned a master's in business administration from the University of Michigan.

He took a college teaching position at Tennessee State College in Nashville, where he met his wife, the former Yvonne Kirkpatrick.

Arriving in Birmingham in 1952, Willie worked for A. G. Gaston, one of the state's few black self-made millionaires. Willie helped Gaston build Booker T. Washington Insurance, Citizens Federal Savings Bank and two radio stations.

At Booker T. Washington, Willie started as controller, became executive vice-president, then president, chairman and CEO from 1987 until his death in 1994.

While leading the insurance firm, Willie also served as secretary and later president of Citizens Federal Savings Bank, one of the premier black-owned banks, which is now part of Citizens Trust Bank of Atlanta.

Willie's business and civic involvement crossed color barriers in Birmingham. He served on the boards of AmSouth Bank,

Alabama Power Co. and Southern Co. and served on the board of directors of the Birmingham Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, including a year as chairman of the board.

Willie used his prominence in the business community to help break down color barriers in his community, as well. He was the first black member of two business organizations and the Kiwanis Club in Birmingham. When the 1990 PGA tournament was slated for Shoal Creek Country Club, an all-white establishment, Willie eased the tension by accepting an honorary membership.

When he died in 2007, his obituary in the New York Times quoted a 1991 Associated Press story about the insurance executive's decision to accept an honorary mem-

bership at Shoal Creek, thereby enabling the championship tournament.

"I never heard anyone call Jackie Robinson a token," Willie told the Associated Press in 1991. "I've opened many doors in this community not only for myself, but for others to come behind me.

"I'm aware that great social changes like this sometimes move very, very slowly. I'm not impatient."

A devout Episcopalian, he was a member of several congregations including St. Mark's and St. Andrew's. At the time of his death, he was a member of the Cathedral Church of the Advent, where he served on the vestry.

Willie also is a member of the Alabama Academy of Honor.



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ROY NICHOLS



CREATING AND ADAPTING HIGH-TECH SOLUTIONS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE HAS BEEN THE BASIS FOR TWO MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR COMPANIES HEADED BY HUNTSVILLE'S ROY NICHOLS.

A native of Chicago, Nichols earned a degree in aeronautical and astronautical engineering at the University of Michigan, where he played a key role in the university's Infrared Physics Championship team. He honed his skills in the university's Infrared Physics Labo-

ratory, where he coordinated research on "optical observables of ballistic targets"—that is, hitting targets with missiles. He moved to McDonnell Douglas, where he served as chief engineer in the discrimination and data processing department, eventually being transferred to Huntsville.

Building on his love and skill for physics, he and his friend, Chris Horgen, established Nichols Research Corp. in Huntsville in 1976. The firm specialized in sensor, missile and information systems, growing to some 40 locations around the nation with 3,000 employees and revenues surpassing \$400 million.

After building the firm into one of the top 100 research, development, technology and engineering firms in the nation, he merged with Computer Sciences Corp. in 1999.

Not ready to put his skills with optical sensors into retirement, Nichols moved on to form Torch Concepts, which uses advanced pattern recognition technology developed by the Department of Defense to find, retrieve, organize and deliver information.

Nichols served as chairman of Torch until December 2005.

Though he has retired from the companies he developed, Nichols continues to serve on the boards of Adtran Inc. and the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology.

Honored for his scientific and his business skills throughout his career, Nichols earned both the Community Services Award from the National Space Club and the Distinguished Service Award from the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce in 1998. In 2000, the Institute of Electronic and Electrical Engineers named him Professional of the Year.

He has served on the Army Science Board and has been a member of the Alabama Space and Science Exhibits Commission through several state administrations.

Active in community affairs, he also serves on the board of Huntsville Botanical Gardens, the University of Alabama Foundation Coalition, and has served as chair of the education committee of the Huntsville Committee of 100.

TOP LEFT: Roy Nichols carries the Olympic Torch in a relay. MIDDLE: Nichols stands in front of the Music and Fitness Building on Randolph School's Drake campus, which was built in 2005. RIGHT: Nichols stands inside the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology in Huntsville. BOTTOM LEFT: Roy Nichols

Sugar Merchant



TAYLOR MORRISSETTE WAS FOND OF CALLING HIMSELF "JUST A SUGAR PEDDLER," BUT IT MADE A SWEET CAREER FOR THE MOBILE MAN.

After graduating from Spring Hill

TAYLOR MORRISSETTE

College in 1953 and serving in the U.S. Army, he went to work for Henderson Sugar Refinery Inc. as a route salesman. Over the next decade, he worked his way up in the company at the same time the company itself was growing and expanding.

He was elected assistant vice president in 1963 and became vice president for sales the next year. Three years later, he became vice president for production and sale of sugar for Southern Industries Corp. He was president of Southern's subsidiary Godchaux-Henderson Sugar Co. Inc. in 1973 when he was recruited by Borden Inc. to be president of Borden's subsidiary North American Sugar Industries Inc.

In 1980, Morrisette bought North American from Borden in a leveraged

buyout and formed Colonial Sugars Inc., building the company — which had a pedigree going back to 19th Century Cuba — into a firm with \$300 million in annual sales. Company headquarters and commodity brokerage offices were in Mobile. The refinery, employing 600 workers, was in Gramercy, La.

According to D.W. Dyer & Co., Colonial was the fourth largest cane sugar refiner in the U.S. in 1987, when Morrisette sold the company for \$25 million to Savannah Foods and Industries. The sale was the cover story for the February issue of Business Alabama that year.

Morrisette also served on the board of First Bancgroup-Alabama Inc. He loved the out of doors, enjoying hunting, fishing and supporting conservation projects.

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Alabama's Cotton Factor

ISIDOR WEIL, ADOLPH WEIL AND ROBERT WEIL



THEY WERE MIDDLEMEN, COMMISSION MERCHANTS, "COTTON FACTORS," IN A WORLD WHERE COTTON WAS KING. The Weil family built a merchant empire that sprawled around the world and lasted for four generations. Three members of that family — grandfather Isidor Weil and grandsons Adolph I. "Bucks" Weil Jr. and Robert Schoenhof Weil — are members of the Alabama Business Hall of Fame.

Isidor arrived in Opelika from his home in Germany, equipped, in the words of his Hall of Fame biography, with "little more than a commitment to hard work, a keen eye for business and a measure of good luck." He went to work at his uncle's store. Correctly gauging the market, he convinced his uncle to buy cotton from the farmers and sell it to local mills. In just a few years, the service was in such high demand that he and partners founded

Weil Brothers in 1878, specializing in cotton buying and exporting.

Active in Opelika civic affairs, he was an alderman, a director of local banks and chaired the Democratic Executive Committee for his district. But he moved the business to Montgomery in 1903 and guided the firm for another 25 years before he died. Under his leadership, the company maintained its Montgomery headquarters, but opened offices around the world to meet the demand of emerging textile regions.

Isidor was as active in Montgomery civic affairs as he had been in Opelika. He served on the boards of several banks, Peoples Cotton Mills, hospitals and health care organizations. He led the Liberty Bond drive during World War I and chaired the Jewish Relief Fund.

Just after World War II, the third generation of Weils joined the company that

their grandfather founded and their father and uncle were leading.

Adolph had earned a law degree and was admitted to the Alabama bar, but he learned the cotton business from the floor up, starting out sweeping up. He was drafted into the Army Medical Corps and returned to join the New York affiliate of the company, Weil Brothers and Butler. He and his brother became directors of the firm in 1950. Adolph became chairman of the family's firm when his father died in 1968.

Robert, Adolph's brother, earned an MBA degree from Harvard Business School before Army service in World War II. Like his brother, he came home from the war to join the family business, helping build it into a \$4.5 billion firm.

The brothers formed a holding company in 1980, Weil Enterprises and Investments Ltd.

Both brothers took an active role in business and industry matters, serving terms as president of the American Cotton Shippers Association, the Atlantic Cotton Association and serving as a director of the New York Cotton Exchange and the National Cotton Council.

Both were also active in civic affairs. Adolph worked with the United Way and the American Cancer Society, but is best remembered for his dedication to the Meals-On-Wheels program. Robert also worked with United Way and the American Cancer Society, as well as the Salvation Army, the Montgomery Area Community Association and the United Negro College Fund.

Though Weil Brothers chose to disband the firm this year, because of increasing instability in the cotton market, the firm was still handling 1.5 billion bales of cotton a year.

Pioneer Industrialist

DANIEL PRATT



RECOGNIZED AS “ALABAMA’S FIRST INDUSTRIALIST,” Daniel Pratt in the 1830s built a cotton gin factory, companion enterprises and the town of Prattville, on the banks of the Autauga River, north of Montgomery. He also promoted economic diversity following the Civil War and turned his economic ventures to railroads in north Alabama and the coal and iron resources around Birmingham.

Pratt was born in New Hampshire in 1799. After completing an apprenticeship as an architect, he moved to Savannah and then to the inland city of Milledgeville, designing homes for planters in the area.

“These homes were some of the most beautiful in the state,” according to the Encyclopedia of Alabama, “featuring large white columns, broad hallways and spiral stairways characteristic of the neo-classical style popular during the period.”

Pratt began managing a cotton gin manufacturing plant, partnering with another New Englander who had relocated to Georgia. Pratt wanted to move west, where fresher fields were being planted with cotton and where Alabama’s rivers would be available to transport the

product. But his partner was worried about conflicts between settlers and the Creeks, so Pratt moved on by himself.

He started his plant on a site along Autauga Creek and two years later embarked on his dream, purchasing nearly 2,000 acres on the creek to build a permanent factory, along with homes, churches and a school for his workers. His factories also made carriages, windows and door sashes, among other goods.

In its heyday it was the largest gin manufacturer in the world, using Sheffield steel combined with Alabama iron.

Pratt’s company shipped gins to farms in Europe, Mexico and Cuba.

He was a stalwart believer in economic diversification and encouraged Alabama to use its timber and coal reserves, while personally investing in railroad and steel ventures – including the rebuilding of the Oxmoor furnaces after the Civil War.

The business journal DeBow’s Review wrote, in 1849, that “no man in Alabama has contributed more than Daniel Pratt to its prosperity; none had done more to bring the loom, the plough, and the anvil into closer proximity.”



TOP LEFT: Daniel Pratt BOTTOM RIGHT: Kristin Allen, interim director of the Prattaugan Heritage Museum stands beside an old cotton gin made by Pratt’s factory.



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