



Artist or Maker: Anonymous American
Maker Dates-Nation-School-Period: Nineteenth Century

View of Montgomery

ca. 1870-1880

Oil on canvas

36 ½ x 60 1/8 inches

Gift of Landmarks Foundation of Montgomery, Inc. by transfer, 2007.18

The composition depicts a townscape that is believed to be based upon the topography and built environment of Montgomery, Alabama at some time in the nineteenth century. Prominently visible on the horizon line at the center left is the Alabama State Capitol building, flying two flags of the United States, one on either side of the central dome. Arrayed on a middle-ground plane is a horizontal string of buildings, primarily domestic residences and churches, set within lightly forested terrain. This inhabited area is separated from the foreground by white fencing, which creates a strong horizontal band at about the center of the painting. The bottom half of the painting appears to depict a sloping landscape containing various figures engaged in day-to-day activities such as tending livestock, boys flying kites, a man hauling firewood, a woman, accompanied by a child, with a laundry basket balanced on her head, and a group of hunters accompanied by a dog. In the immediate foreground is a stand of trees that partially obscures other activity, predominantly the passing of a steam-powered train, with its' smoke creating a cloud-like form in the center foreground. A group of chickens, depicted grossly out of scale, are shown in the right foreground, and a man is seen picking fruit from a tree at the bottom center.

Provenance:

Alabama Chamber of Commerce, Montgomery, Alabama, 1955 to May 1971
Landmarks Foundation, Montgomery, Alabama, 1971 to 2007
Gift of Landmarks Foundation of Montgomery, Inc. by transfer

Major Published References:

Wayne Flynt. *Montgomery: An Illustrated History*. Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1980, pp. 15 and 135, illus.

Exhibition History:

Montgomery, Alabama, The Ordeman-Shaw House, Old Alabama Town, 1971 to 1995.

Analysis:

(Place and describe importance of object in the oeuvre of artist and the period, relationship to other existing works of its type, quality and rarity. For multiples indicate series/state and relationship to other series/states.):

In 1853, the American landscape architect and designer, Frederick Law Olmsted visited Montgomery and deemed it, “a fine and promising young city.”¹ This assessment was made some thirty years after its’ founding on December 3, 1819, and when it was yet in its infancy as an urban environment. Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century, Montgomery’s location on a major commercial waterway (the Alabama River), its nascent overland connections via road and railway, as well as the development of the middle part of the State as a center of cotton production offered substantial potential for economic and social development. In addition, as of 1846, Montgomery became the capital of the State, and as the center of State government, politics came to play a major role in the life of its citizens. The subject of *View of Montgomery* is not only Montgomery’s natural and built environment, but also its’ material resources, and the cross-section of mankind who called the city home in the latter nineteenth century.²

The history of the painting *View of Montgomery* provides few clues as to its origins. The canvas was discovered in 1955 in the attic of The Owens-Teague House, a Greek Revival–style home built in 1848, located on Perry Street in downtown Montgomery. The house was privately owned until The Alabama State Chamber of Commerce purchased it in 1955 to serve as its headquarters; *View of Montgomery* was found there by Chamber personnel and was transferred to the Landmarks Foundation in downtown Montgomery in 1971. It remained on view at Old Alabama Town’s Ordeman-Shaw House for about twenty-five years until it was placed on long-term loan with the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in 1995.³

¹ As quoted in Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalogue: Historic American Buildings Survey, A*

² Major published sources for the history of Montgomery are *A Guide to the City of Montgomery* (Montgomery, AL: The Junior League of Montgomery, 1969); Wayne Flynt, *Montgomery: An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc, 1980), and Mary Ann Neeley, ed., *The Works of Matthew Blue: Montgomery’s First Historian* (Montgomery and Louisville: NewSouth Books, 2010).

³ The painting was transferred to the ownership of the MMFA in 2007 based upon the Landmarks Foundation Board’s belief that the museum was in the best position to professionally preserve the work and exhibit it on a long-term basis.

There are discernable architectural and incidental elements in the painting that, to historians, suggest the decade of 1870 to 1880 as a possible creation date. The most prominent element to suggest the date of post-1865 is the depiction of the State Capitol Building, which is prominently shown on the horizon at the center left. When the city became the capital of the State in 1846, the citizens of Montgomery subscribed to a bond-issue that raised funds for the construction of a capitol building on the site that had been reserved for it by one of the town's founders, Andrew Dexter. Designed by architect Stephen Decatur Button, it was constructed on an elevated plot of land at the end of what was then known as Market Street (now Dexter Avenue). Unfortunately, this building burned about two years later, on December 14, 1849, and a new capitol building, built 1850-1851, replaced it on the same site. The building pictured in *View of Montgomery* is the second design, one based upon Button's original plan, but without a pediment, and with the addition of the clock that surmounts the entablature on the west façade. The clock is visible at the roofline, along with two flags of the United States, which fly either side of it. The U.S. flags suggest that the painting probably depicts the capitol as it appeared after the Civil War ended.⁴

Despite the naïve style of the painting (many of the elements are grossly out of scale), the artist took special care in the depiction of the various buildings, and some are identifiable as well known structures in the town. One of the most prominent in the picture is St. John's Episcopal Church, the red brick building with spire that sits at the middle right. The church was organized in 1834; the building in the painting was constructed in 1854-1855. Likewise, St. Peter's Catholic Church was founded in 1834, its building constructed in 1857. (The bell tower of St. Peter's is most likely the dome-shaped form that appears to the right of the tallest tree in the center of the painting.) These buildings were made of brick rather than the wooden frame construction that predominated in the earliest decades. The fire that burned the first capitol building was indicative of the dangers endemic to wooden buildings before the introduction of fire protection services—major conflagrations in 1838 and 1846 convinced commercial interests of the wisdom of brick construction.

While these churches were constructed in what was the favored mode for many houses of worship in the nineteenth century (that is neo-Gothic or neo-Romanesque styles), high-style domestic architecture in the early to mid-nineteenth century was dominated by a taste for the classic styles of Greek and Roman architecture.⁵ The building depicted at the left edge of the composition is illustrative of this style, which featured the use of a porch with pediment surmounting columns of the classical orders. On the



City of Montgomery, Alabama, 1861 *

This engraving shows a view of the City from across the Alabama river during the early part of the Civil War. The most visible elements in this reportorial view are the State Capitol Building, the spire of St. John's Episcopal Church, and another group of buildings that may include St. Peter's Catholic Church. The field workers in the foreground are preparing the soil for the planting of cotton, which was, and still is, grown on the river flood plain.

Courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; Q5135.

⁴ See the exhibition catalogue *Spaces and Places: Views of Montgomery's Built Environment* (Montgomery, AL: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), p. 17.

⁵ Public buildings, as well as private homes, were constructed in the monumental style of the Greek and Roman Revival, an aspect of neo-classicism. In Jacksonian America, the Greek and Roman style was associated with democracy and the republican form of government appropriate to the American social experiment. Gamble, p. 57.

* To view larger: <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/photo/id/3576/rec/111>

painting's right side, the roofs of two monumental homes are visible in the background: one is a brick home with a hipped roof and tall brick chimneys at either end; the second is similarly configured, but surmounted by a large cupola. The features of these homes were most likely inspired, or literally copied, from the most popular builders guides of the day, including most prominently Minard Lafever's *The Modern Builder's Guide* published in 1833.⁶

The accumulation of buildings seen in this painting illustrate the point made by Robert Gamble in his book, *The Alabama Catalog: Historic American Buildings Survey, A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State*.

Through most of the...(nineteenth) century...those structures in Alabama and the South that had mirrored national trends of taste were but a minority at one end of the architectural spectrum. At the other end of the same spectrum flourished, simultaneously, several distinct regional modes of building. In between lay numerous other structures influenced by both extremes—folk habit on the one hand, the latest academic fashion on the other. And imposing themselves on even the most ambitious building schemes were powerful social, economic, and geographical constraints that encouraged some tendencies while limiting others.⁷

The spacious, but simple, yellow, two-story wood frame house that is prominent in the middle ground at the left, along with the small wooden cabins grouped at the center of the picture visually demonstrate Gamble's point—that nineteenth century frontier communities were working and living environments that incorporated people of many ages, social classes, and functions in buildings that reflected their inhabitants' stations in life and purposes, as well as the aspirations of the community.

The subjects recorded in *View of Montgomery* make it apparent that the artist saw the work as a record of a specific place, and it was his (or her) intention to document the society as well as the topography. In addition to recording the built environment, the painting documents many typical inhabitants of the town, as well as the activities common to daily life. The pictorial space has been subdivided into sections that contain various vignettes recording activities that appear to be happening simultaneously, but are visually separate from one another. The artist seems to capture "a moment in time" for the purpose of characterizing segments of the larger society, both black and white.⁸

Among the more significant activities are those associated with contemporary forms of land transport: at the right side of the painting a mule-drawn wagon is fully loaded with bales of cotton being brought into downtown Montgomery for sale to brokers. Further to the right, and near the white fence that divides the upper and lower compositions, a horse-drawn hearse is most likely destined for Montgomery's oldest cemetery, Oakwood, where prominent Montgomerians and Civil War casualties of both sides of the conflict were interred. A horse-drawn buggy drives along parallel to the train track, and the train billowing flame and smoke is

⁶ For a discussion of carpenter's handbooks see Gamble, p. 12-13.

⁷ Gamble, p. 5.

⁸ The fact that the painting does not show the "typical" views of the Capital City makes the time period depicted even more problematic to determine. Most surviving photographs and engravings of Montgomery in the nineteenth century show the Capitol, Market Street (now Dexter Avenue), Court Square and Commerce Street. These were the "center of town" at that time. The buildings, forms of transport, and clothing worn by those pictured aid in dating these images.

barely visible behind the trees in the foreground. The artist reflects that animals were not only the inhabitants of the town to bear burdens: a man at the far left carries a load of firewood, and a washer woman, carrying a basket of laundry on her head, has just passed him on the dirt track. Recreation is recorded in the kite flying that engages the young boys at the right. Productive recreation was also important in the nineteenth century: while game hunting is a pastime in the modern era, in the nineteenth century it put needed food on the tables of the working class. The same can be observed of the berry and apple pickers that harvest fruits in the foreground. Perhaps the clearest evidence that the work may show Montgomery during the decade of the 1870s-1880s is the dress of the tiny female figures shown against the fence rail at the back left—their dresses featuring skirts with bustles were the prevailing fashion in that decade.

While the era depicted is hard to pin down, likewise the date the painting was made is also not clear. Because the artist/maker of *View of Montgomery* is unknown, and the work is painted using a rudimentary, naïve style common in many historic periods, establishing a firm creation date for the picture is problematic.⁹ Montgomery united two pre-existing frontier settlements: New Philadelphia and East Alabama, each of which had been founded separately in 1817-1818. East Alabama was oriented toward the Alabama River, which served as the main artery for commerce in that era. Appropriately, the primary road created by the settlers of East Alabama eventually became Commerce Street, which terminated at the river wharf. New Philadelphia was organized around the land that was the eventual site for the construction of the Alabama State Capitol building in 1847. Its' main artery, Market Street, ran from the capitol down toward the artesian well at what became Court Square. Eventually the two areas of the city converged at Court Square, where the town's inhabitants went for fresh water and where the first Courthouse was constructed. The geographic centerpiece of the town's development was therefore the area defined by Market Street, Commerce Street and Court Square, none of which are visible in *View of Montgomery*.

Although specific buildings such as the Capitol, St. Johns, and St. Peters are discernable in the composition, their orientation also does not suggest a specific point of view from which the artist painted the city. The view of the Capitol in the distance suggests a point from the general direction of the northwest. That viewpoint would



This birds-eye view of the town published in 1872 shows the proximity of the rail system to the Alabama River. Note the train passing along Water Street, and approaching the river landing at the base of Commerce Street. The Capitol building is seen near the left edge, at the top of Market Street. On this map, the presence of forested area is symbolized by the rows and groups of trees, and thus the *View of Montgomery* may relate to a view from somewhere adjacent to the river and the nearby course of the railroad.

Courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; Q4977*.

⁹ The painting had restoration treatment sometime prior to 1973, and professional conservation and lining in 1973 while the painting was in the possession of Landmarks Foundation. The Atlanta Art Conservation Center cleaned the work and adjusted the in-painting in 2008. The report of that conservator indicates that the line of birds in the sky and at least one of the two kites shown in the painting appear to have been added by a previous restorer. No chemical analysis or imaging of the painting has occurred which might give a better assessment of its creation date.

* To view larger: <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/photo/id/4429/rec/101>

be supported by the fact that railway development placed the tracks in proximity to the river, with the obvious advantage of facilitating the movement of cargo from one means of transport to another. (Railroad development occurred between 1832 and the early 1850s—by 1851 the line was completed to West Point, Georgia, linking Montgomery to the East Coast.)¹⁰ Most likely then, the trees in the foreground obscure not just the railway but possibly the Alabama River as well, and the painter's intention was to depict a vista of the town from across or near the river. The abundance of trees and other vegetation are consistent with a second observation made by Olmsted in his visit during 1853: "...After climbing to the top of the Statehouse dome in 1853, Olmstead wrote a friend that he was struck by the surrounding horizon where, 'the eye falls in every direction upon a dense boundless forest, boundless as the sea, and producing the same solemn sensation of reverence for infinitude.'"¹¹ Thus it seems the artist's intention, no matter when the painting was actually made, was to show Montgomery at an early point in its development as a settlement and a society.

Despite the unknowns, *View of Montgomery* is an important artistic record and historic document of Montgomery's past. By virtue of the fact that the artist did not concentrate on the city's established landmarks—the view down from the Capitol to Court Square or a view of Commerce street for example—the work provides an alternative view of life in its earliest years. By focusing as much attention on the activities of the inhabitants as the built environment, the artist gives us a compelling snapshot of what life was like in a nineteenth-century Southern town.

¹⁰ Flynt, p. 18.

¹¹ Gamble, p. 6.