

‘The Major’ James Henry Dooley

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Before joining the Confederate army, James Henry Dooley enrolled at Georgetown College (now University) at the age of 15 where he distinguished himself in academics graduating in 1860. He returned to Georgetown college after the Civil War in 1865 to complete a Master of Arts degree. When the war broke out, James proudly marched out of Richmond in the green Richmond uniform of the Montgomery Guard, still commanded by his father, John Dooley (The Montgomery Guard was named after the Dublin born Irish revolutionary war hero General Richard Montgomery). James Dooley was wounded at the Battle of Williamsburg, captured and confined until his release in August 1862. Although never an officer in the Confederate Army, in later years he was referred to as “Major” an honorary gesture by the Richmond community.

The Major began his career as an attorney and earned a reputation as a brilliant legal mind with a sharp sense of business and excellent oratorical skills. He served for six years in the Virginia General Assembly and joined the board of the Richmond and Danville railroad. They expanded lines and improved the efficiency of Virginia’s railroad system. He made his fortune in real estate and the country’s expanding railroad enterprises.

He was instrumental in the reconstruction of Richmond. As he acquired wealth he gave much of it away as he considered this to be his responsibility to the community. Having no children, the Major and his wife were best known for their charity, distributing their fortune to promote happiness for the less fortunate – especially children – and to encourage learning. Like his father before him, he served as a board member of St. Joseph’s Orphanage for over 50 years and willed \$3 million to the institution, the largest received by a Roman Catholic charity in the U.S. at that time. He served on the Medical College of Virginia Board and in 1919 gave funds for the construction of the Dooley Hospital. The Dooley’s willed \$500,000 to the Children’s Hospital and the same amount to the Richmond Public Library.

James and Sallie Dooley, while horseback riding in Henrico County, fell in love with a 100-acre tract of farmland along the James river. They bought that property and built a 12,000 square foot, 33-room stone mansion along with a stone barn calling their home “May Mont”, combining Mrs. Dooley’s maiden name and the French word for mountain or hill.

Major Dooley lived at Maymont until his death in 1922. Originally buried with his former Confederate comrades in Hollywood Cemetery, but later reinterred, along with Mrs. Dooley, who died in 1925, at the mausoleum at Maymont. As recommended by her husband, she left Maymont to the City of Richmond to be used as a public park and museum. It opened to the public in March 1926.