

Who was Henry Clay Grubb?

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The Plaza building at the corner of North Main and West Innes Streets has been a Salisbury landmark for more than 100 years. This beautiful building was designed by Frank Milburn and was the tallest steel beam building in the state when it was completed in 1914. For years, it was called the Wallace Building, and was the premier office location for prominent businessmen, doctors and lawyers. If you look above the main entrance on West Innes Street, you will see the initials of the man who built a "seven story building in a three-story town." Henry Clay Grubb had a vision that became the Salisbury "skyscraper."

Mr. Grubb was a resident of Davidson County and listed his occupation as farmer on census records. In Salisbury, he was a businessman with an infamous reputation. He owned a large liquor distillery, and seemed to enjoy outwitting the tax revenue officer. The social elite of Salisbury considered him "backwoods" because of his miscreant ways. Mr. Grubb was an atypical businessman and a prime example of the fortunes that could be made from the "whiskey business."

Henry had more than his share of disagreement with the law for petty fights and disorderly conduct. He made headlines in 1905, when he was tried for the murder of Obe Davis, his brother in law. Both men were well known for their short tempers. On May 9, 1905, Obe was waiting for Henry in the parking lot of a small Davidson County church. A witness at the trial stated that Obe climbed down from his wagon and walked toward Grubb. Three shots were fired from Henry's gun. When the sheriff arrived, Henry said it was self-defense. According to Henry, Obe had threatened him numerous times and had hired men to kill him. When the sheriff examined Obe's body, a gun was found in his pocket.

Henry's lawyers had the trial moved to Salisbury to avoid a biased Davidson County jury. The prosecution's arguments concentrated on Henry's reputation and past squabbles. The district attorney made sure the jury was aware of Henry's ruthless temper, but during cross-examination, Henry was cool and calm. He always had an explanation for his actions and his answers were often humorous. The paper reported that Mr. Grubb was "very pleasant, amiable, and gentle." Lee Overman, Kluttz, Watson and Raper were listed as Grubb's lawyers. During the trial's summation, the prosecutor dressed a dummy in the clothes Obe was wearing at the time of his death. The district attorney showed the jury the bullet holes. He hoped to convince the jury that the murder was premeditated, but the state was no match for Henry's lawyers. Mr. Grubb was found not guilty. After the verdict was announced, a trial observer was quick to say that the outcome would have been very different if the trial had taken place in Davidson County. It was the observer's opinion that the smooth talking lawyers could not have tricked a jury of men from Grubb's hometown. In Davidson County, Mr. Grubb would have been punished for his foul deed.

Shortly after the trial, Henry was ambushed and shot by Nat Crump, a black man with a notorious reputation. Henry posted a \$600 reward. When Crump was captured, Henry went to Tennessee to bring him back for trial. Crump had been badly injured while on the run. It was necessary for him to travel back to Salisbury in the baggage car where he could lie down. Henry also rode in the baggage car and cared for Crump during the trip. This event could have been another example of Henry's determination to have the final word, or quite possibly, Henry wanted to prove that his life had been threatened, and that killing Obe was justifiable.

In 1906, Henry made several significant changes in his business. He knew that prohibition was inevitable even in Salisbury, the "wettest and wickedest town." He moved his liquor distillery/rectifying company to Florida. He concentrated on improving and expanding his land and real estate. He purchased several small farms in Rowan County and built exceptionally nice homes for the families of his farm managers. A lovely farmhouse located on McCoy Road is a good example of the houses Grubb built.

Henry purchased the new Meroney Theatre that had been built in 1904. Dr. Leroy Meroney and his sister Lena had financed the construction of the theatre with help from Joseph Fels, a millionaire philanthropist from Pennsylvania who had made his fortune as a soap manufacturer. Fels was a well-known social reformer who believed a single land tax was the solution for world poverty. Fels funded numerous planned co-op communities in England and several in the United States. Cleo, NC is one of his North Carolina communities. Fels also financed buildings that would be constructed on vacant land. Henry met Fels through his purchase of the Meroney. Fels must have believed that Henry was more than just a backwoods whiskey drummer; he agreed to finance Henry in the construction of the state's tallest building.

From the outside, it appeared that Henry's life was taking a turn for the better, but actually, his life was beginning to unravel at the seams. Theaters did not produce large profits. Henry added vaudeville reviews in the hopes of drawing larger audiences, and he incorporated the newest entertainment technology. He opened a moving picture show. When the construction of the Grubb building began, Henry had considerably more money going out than he had coming in. A fire destroyed his home and another fire badly damaged his distillery. He was also seriously injured when he wrecked his automobile.

Henry was described by his oldest daughter as a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When Henry was sober, he was a caring parent and a good family provider. Henry's drinking increased as his business suffered. Henry had physically abused his wife from time to time and when his world started to fall apart, his drinking increased and so did the abuse. On Aug. 9, 1913, he came home drunk and in a rage. He dragged his wife from her bed and began attacking her with a knife.

There are varying accounts of what happened next. What we do know is that Emma Grubb managed to grab Henry's gun from its holster and shoot him three times. The sheriff was called, and Emma openly admitted that she had killed her husband. When the coroner examined the body, he stated that any one of the shots would have been fatal. The coroner's jury met on August 10 and cleared Emma of all guilt. Her injuries left no doubt; it was self-defense.

The Charlotte Observer and the New York Times shared the headline, "Wife Kills Rich Husband ... Her exoneration is quick." The sensational headlines were typical journalism of the time. The facts were very different. Henry didn't own 5,000 acres of prime farmland. According to his daughter, his holdings were closer to 200 acres. Henry didn't own a skyscraper. The Grubb Building was not finished, and after Henry's death, Joseph Fels was declared the owner. Most of Henry's property was sold at auction. The Beard family bought the theater. Nothing was left in Salisbury to carry on the Grubb name.

Who was Henry Clay Grubb? There is no one living who knew him. No one can definitively, separate the fact from fiction. The following statement was made about Henry's untimely death. "It wasn't that nobody cared who killed him. ... He was considered so dangerous a man that everyone was relieved that he was gone."

Was Henry a visionary? Was he a selfish, self absorbed, "no good"? Was he Salisbury's version of Howard Hughes? If we had more information, possibly we could come to an intelligent conclusion. To say that Henry Clay Grubb was a man of his time is far too simplistic. We may not approve of the way he lived his life. We may not like some of the things that he did, but when we drive through downtown, we cannot dismiss his creation. The Grubb Building is a landmark that defines our city.

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