
The Best Man Who Ever Lived in Nashville: Duncan Robertson (1770-1833)

by John Norvell

Duncan Robertson was known as “the best man who ever lived in Nashville.”¹ When he died May 1, 1833, at 63 years of age, his obituary noted: “His loss will be long and severely felt in our community and his place will not be soon or easily supplied.”²

In the Nashville City Cemetery there is an imposing monument at his gravesite with an inscription that reads in part:

To the Memory of Duncan Robertson A Native of Scotland and a Resident Of the United States 43 Years Who died at Nashville the 1st May of 1833 in the 63rd Year of his Age. The Citizens of Nashville have erected this Monument. His loss will be long and severely felt and his place will not be soon or easily supplied. Always first and best in ever work and philanthropy and beneficence. To do good to his fellow men entirely forgetful of himself seemed to be the great object of his life....³



**Duncan Robertson's monument at the
Nashville City Cemetery.**

Who was Duncan Robertson?

It is clear, from the monument inscription above and his obituaries, that he was born in Scotland and that he had come to Nashville about 1790. Other than that information little information seems to exist about his life.

A series of advertisements in the press and his obituary stated that he owned a Nashville book store which apparently was the source of his wealth.⁴

A 1909 *Nashville American* article stated that his granddaughter Mary Catherine Carroll, the niece of Tennessee Governor William Carroll, married Caleb Cushing Norvell.⁵ Caleb Cushing Norvell was a

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partner in the bookstore enterprise with Robertson and later administrator of his estate.⁶ Caleb and Mary Catherine Norvell named a son Duncan Robertson Norvell in his honor.⁷

The Nashville *Union and American* of February 17, 1856 called him “the Howard of Nashville.”⁸ This last item sheds some light. John Howard (born 1726-died 1790) was an English philanthropist in the areas of prison reform and public health.⁹ A 1990 biography of Howard states:

Howard's detailed proposals for improvements were designed to enhance the physical and mental health of the prisoners and the security and order of the prison. His recommendations pertaining to such matters as the prison location, plan and furnishings, the provision of adequate water supply, and prisoner's diet promoted hygiene and physical health. Recommendations concerning the quality of prison personnel, rules related to the maintenance of standards of health and order and an independent system of inspection, reflect the need for prison personnel to set a moral example.¹⁰

Robertson, then, was a Nashville philanthropist who was favorably compared with Howard and the work that he had done in England. Robertson's obituary stated:

To do good to his fellow men, entirely forgetful of himself, seemed to be the great object of his life. In the dungeon of the wretched forsaken prisoner, at the bedside of the sick and friendless, and in the abode of poverty and distress he was almost constantly found . . . he literally went about doing good. No personal sacrifice was too great for him to make, when calls of benevolence demanded it.¹¹

When he died May 1, 1833, the people of Nashville felt a genuine loss. On the day after his funeral, the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions adjourned in his honor and on May 4th a funeral sermon was preached at the Masonic Hall.¹²

Almost immediately, a proposal appeared in the *Nashville American* to erect a monument to his memory. A public subscription for funds started on May 21, 1833, at the book store of Caleb Cushing Norvell. Tributes in the press to Robertson continued, an unusual practice given the small spaces usually accorded to local deaths in the newspapers at that time. This, it was noted, was for a man who won lasting honor and respect without having ever engaged in politics or public affairs.¹³ Few examples of his generosity to the Nashville community seem to have been actually reported in the press, it seemed that it was so well known that it did not need to be reported.

Later, the leading citizens of Nashville founded the Robertson Association in 1856 to give aid to the residents of the city and, provide “for the afflicted and the destitute.”¹⁴ The Association was often cited for the work that it performed during the several cholera epidemics that had visited Nashville during the late 19th century.¹⁵ And, thus for many years after his death, the Association kept alive the legacy of the man called: “the most noble-hearted... Christian gentleman, and one of the most benevolent men who ever lived there.”¹⁶

Editor's Note: Although Duncan Robertson shared his surname with Nashville's founder James Robertson, there is no evidence that they were related. The ancestry of James Robertson has been widely debated.

References

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May 3, 1833
THE LATE DUNCAN ROBERTSON.
Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions for Davidson County—April Term, 1833.
THURSDAY MORNING, May 2.
ANDREW HAYS, Esq. Solicitor General, moved the Court to adjourn through respect to the memory of DUNCAN ROBERTSON, who departed this life on yesterday, and is this day to be buried. Mr H remarked that the deceased was one of the oldest citizens of the place, that for more than forty years he had comforted the afflicted, visited the imprisoned, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and alleviated the hardships of the widow and the orphan. The esteem and gratitude of this people is due to his memory, and that all may have an opportunity of testifying their regard for his example in life, and be gratified in the universal desire to attend his funeral, it is moved that the court adjourn for this day.
This motion was seconded by GEORGE C. CHITDRESS, Esq. who observed, that he hoped the court would adjourn in conformity with the motion of the Attorney General, from whom, as a public officer, the motion had properly proceeded.
Mr C. further remarked, that he was aware these things, perhaps, could be no gratification to the dead, but it was due to the memory of such a man, due to the feelings of his friends and family, advantageous to the cause of virtue, and a salutary stimulus to the living in the practice of benevolence, that the memory of so good a man—if not the best of men—should be thus publicly noticed, as well as privately lamented. He therefore moved that the Court do adjourn, and that the reasons thereof be spread on the records of the Court and published in the public journals of this city.
Whereupon the Court adjourned, and ordered these proceedings to be recorded and a copy thereof to be published.
A true copy from the Records.
Test, HENRY EWING, Clerk.