



Harry Pennington recalled as a man who could 'do things other people could not do'

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By **Mike Marshall, The Huntsville Times**



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file photo

Harry Pennington, shown here in a photograph taken at his office last October, was once chief of staff for former Gov. George Wallace.

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Harry Pennington's trademarks in the latter years of his life included bolo ties and his stories about some of the state's most powerful politicians.

Pennington, a man of power himself during his long career in law, the judiciary and politics, died Saturday at 92.

He was perhaps best known as the chief of staff during former Gov. George Wallace's second term, from 1971-75, a period marked by the 1972 assassination attempt on Wallace.

Pennington, though, had considerable influence as a local lawyer, judge and legislator - a career that spanned some of the city's most dynamic years of growth.

"He could get it done," said Fred Simpson, the Madison County district attorney from 1969-81. "He was a standout from normal people. He was able to do things other people could not do."

An example includes Simpson's first meeting with Pennington in 1969. David "Dea" Thomas, the previous district attorney, had resigned from office.

In his quest to succeed Thomas, Simpson went to Pennington, then a member of the Alabama House of Representatives.

"I had not had any dealings with him," Simpson said. "(But) his reputation was all over town."

By then, Pennington had acquired power, in part, through his stint as district attorney and his ascension as a prominent landowner.

In the mid-1950s, even before the official opening of Memorial Parkway, he sold the land on which The Huntsville Times now stands.

He bought the land for "\$30 a front foot," as he recalled in an interview this past fall. He sold it to The Times for \$60 a front foot.

In 1960, Pennington was the 23rd Circuit Court judge. On July 3 of that year, he performed the marriage of Vernon Presley, Elvis' father, and Dee Elliott, who grew up in Huntsville.

The ceremony was performed at Pennington's home on Flemington Road, just off Whitesburg Drive. Two years later, in 1962, he was elected to the first of his two terms in the Alabama House of Representatives.

In the final years of his second term, Simpson went to Pennington's office at Huntsville Lumber Company, seeking Pennington's support for the vacant district attorney's office.

"He kind of overpowered you," Simpson said. "He looked you dead in the eye and told you what he could do ... (and) how to do it. So I was very impressed."

From there, said Simpson, Pennington went to then-Gov. Albert Brewer and "asked him to appoint me."

Pennington was a native of Wetumpka. He moved to Huntsville in the late 1940s, after graduating from the University of Alabama School of law.

He had never been to Huntsville until he arrived here with his wife, Jeanette. They loaded their car after Pennington's graduation from law school, seeking a place to settle.

They went to Mobile, then headed north on U.S. 231. The decision to move here was cemented when Pennington saw two signs as he arrived in Huntsville - one for the arsenal that was for sale, the other for a new car manufacturer that was preparing to start work here.

The arsenal was never sold, and the car, the Keller car, was never mass produced.

"I don't think anything ever beat being at the right place at the right time and knowing the right people," Pennington said in an interview last fall. "And I happened to hit that right combination."

Pennington was also active in several local service organizations. He was on the board of the U.S. Space & Rocket Center, the North Alabama Council of Boy Scouts of America, the Huntsville/Madison County Mental Health Association and the United Way of Huntsville and Madison County, among others.

"He always had an optimistic outlook," said Evie Spearman, who served with Pennington on the Mental Health Association board. "There aren't many of those left."

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