HERBERT: FIRST ON CABINET

U. S. naval power vision of forgotten Alabamian

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When the Birmingham News published the fact that Winton M. Blount was the second Alabamian in history to be appointed to a Cabinet position, it turned out very few Alabamians had ever heard of the first state resident so honored — Hiliary Abner Herbert.

This is understandable in light of time lapsed since Herbert served as secretary of the Navy in the second term of President Grover Cleveland, beginning in 1893, some 76 years ago. But a look at the Herbert record of accomplishment not only as secretary of the Navy, but as a member of the House, representing the district that includes Montgomery, shows he deserves more attention than he gets in most modern-day histories of Alabama.

Herbert won unusual national distinction. And if “Red” Blount can do as much for the postal service as Hiliary Herbert did for the Navy, he will make Alabama proud indeed.

Committee chairman

NOT LONG AFTER Herbert was elected to the House in 1877, he became an influential member of the Naval Affairs Committee; and in the 49th, 50th and 51st Congresses he served as its chairman. This covered the period 1884 to 1896. During that time he pressed for the authorization of new warships to build up the woefully weak United States fleet. And he continued his efforts in the early 1890s when he was the ranking minority member of the committee, and of course he did likewise as secretary of the Navy in the 1893-'97 period.

He met with remarkable success. On one occasion while he was chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee, he steered through to approval on the House floor, after a Herbert presentation lasting only 20 minutes, a $20 million appropriation mainly for new warship construction. That was a whopping sum in those distant, peace-time years.

Due largely to Herbert’s influence, when the Spanish-American War flared in 1898, the U. S. Navy was exceptionally well prepared. All of the ships that fought at Santiago on July 3, 1898, except one, were authorized by the Naval Affairs Committee of which Herbert was a member, or were commissioned by him as secretary of the Navy — in a number of cases, both.

And the same was true of five of the six warships that humbled the Spanish fleet at Manila on May 1, 1898.

Exposes price conspiracy

IN THE LATTER PART of his service as secretary of the Navy, Herbert won world-wide attention by exposing a conspiracy of principal armor-plate manufacturers of the world to hold up prices.

He began by notifying Congress that two American manufacturers were in combination to charge unreasonable prices for armor-plate. Congress then instructed him to investigate. He took personal charge of the probe, including investigations in Europe. His report showed not only the world-wide conspiracy, but pointed out what a fair price should be. The result was that the next purchase of armor-plate by the Navy cost Uncle Sam only one-fourth the price asked by the manufacturers prior to the Herbert investigation.

Civil War hero

BORN AT LAURENS, S. C., in 1834, Herbert attended the University of Alabama in 1852-'53. He started a law practice in Greenville, in 1857, and served with distinction in the Civil War, rising to the rank of colonel.

He fought with Confederate infantry in many battles, was wounded and captured by Union forces in the Battle of Fair Oaks. Exchanged after two months, he went into combat again — at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, Salem Heights, Antietam, Gettysburg and the Wilderness, where he was wounded so severely that he was retired from active service.

In the difficult Reconstruction years Herbert did outstanding work as a citizen, and as an attorney, to help rebuild the economic and political structure that had been shattered by the war. Part of the public recognition of his contributions came with his election to Congress in 1877.

One illustration of the esteem he merited from his fellow Alabamians is the fact that the late Herbert Lehman, governor and Senator of New York, was named for Hiliary Herbert.

Lehman’s father, Mayer Lehman, was one of three brothers who migrated from Germany to Alabama in the 1840s.

The first arrival, Henry Lehman, worked his way up the Alabama River from Mobile to Montgomery selling merchandise from a wagon.
COL. HILARY ABNER HERBERT

He sent money back to Bavaria for Emanuel and Mayer, his brothers, to come to America. There was a Lehman store on Commerce Street, and later "Lehman Brothers" on Court Square.

They dealt in various merchandise and, in the decade before the Civil War (Henry died in 1855), developed a prosperous cotton brokerage business.

Mayer Lehman remained in Montgomery during the Civil War, while Emanuel had moved on to New York. By 1878, when his son Herbert was born, Mayer Lehman had joined Emanuel in New York. But the point is that Mayer Lehman plainly thought a lot of Hiliary A. Herbert, of Alabama.

After his retirement from public life in 1897, Herbert remained in the nation's capital and practiced law with his son-in-law, Benjamin Micou.

He wrote a book, "Abolition Crusade and Its Consequences," and was coauthor of another entitled, "Why the Solid South, or Reconstruction by Eye-Witnesses." He also wrote many magazine articles on political, historical and sociological subjects.

He died March 6, 1919, while on a visit to Tampa, Fla.