

South Carolina's Story The making of a state



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German Native, Orphan Became Leading Figure During Civil War

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A man who was born in a foreign country and spent most of his life as an orphan later became a leading figure in the Civil War and a prime mover in reforming the educational system in South Carolina.

Christopher Memminger was born in 1803 in Nayhingem in the Duchy of Wirttemberg, Germany. Soon after his birth, Memminger's father, an officer, was killed and his mother emigrated to Charleston. At the age of 4, however Memminger's mother died and he spent the next seven years in the Charleston Orphan House.

After all of this initial bad luck, young Christopher finally got a break in life. He was taken into the home of prominent Charlestonian Thomas Bennett, who later became governor of South Carolina. About a year later he was sent to South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), where he studied law and graduated in 1819.

Memminger then returned to Charleston and established a successful law practice. Soon he became involved in the political issues of the day.

Memminger took a tough stand against nullification. He wrote a satirical book in biblical style titled the Book of Nullification in which he attacked the leaders of the movement.

In 1836 he began his long career as a member of the State House of

Representatives, soon after becoming the chairman of the committee on finance.

As Memminger's political influence grew, he became increasingly outspoken in defense of slavery as morally right. After John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, he became wholly won over to secession.

Memminger was sent by South Carolina as a commissioner to address the Virginia Legislature on the need for joint defensive answers. He became a member of the secession convention of 1861 and later, as a delegate to the Southern Convention in Montgomery, he served as chairman of the com-

mittee that drafted the provisional constitution of the Confederate States.

When he was appointed secretary of the treasury by Jefferson Davis he was given a difficult — and what eventually became a hopeless — task. Most of his various schemes to finance the war effort failed. But he saw no way to change the situation.

He did manage, however, to negotiate a European loan on cotton and a number of other revenue producing measures before resigning as secretary in 1864. Interestingly, Memminger was succeeded by another Charlestonian, cotton exporter George H. Trenhold.

His reputation tarnished, Mem-

minger retired to private life in Flat Rock, N.C. He stayed there until 1867 when he received a presidential pardon and returned to practice law.

Memminger's work on behalf of the South Carolina public schools was much more successful than his ventures on behalf of the Confederacy.

From 1855 to 1888 Memminger served as commissioner of the public schools of Charleston. As early as the 1830s, Memminger began work with another South Carolinian, W. J. Bennett, to reorganize the public schools of South Carolina.

By 1850 the Northern states had begun to provide a publicly funded grade school system for its children. In South Carolina, as in other Southern states, the idea of public education was slow to take hold.

Memminger and Bennett went East to New England and New York to study their public school systems. They liked what they saw in New York and, when they returned to South Carolina, changes were made based on that state's schools, too. In 1860, just 10 years after Memminger became commissioner, more than 3,000 students were enrolled in the public schools of Charleston.

Memminger's other post-Civil War activities included the organization of a company for the manufacture of sulphuric acid and super-phosphates and service on the board of South Carolina College.

He married twice: first to Mary Wilkinson in 1832 and then, after her death, to her sister Sara H. Wilkinson. Christopher Gustavus Memminger died on March 7, 1888.