

First Recorded July 4th Oration

Page 8, Rock Hill Times, July 5, 1984

South Carolina's Story



By Louise Pettus and Ron Chepesiuk of the Winthrop College faculty

The first recorded Fourth of July oration in America was made by David Ramsay of Charleston on July 4, 1778. Ramsay, then 29 years of age and a member of the Legislature, excelled as an orator. Thomas Y. Hayne described him as a "remarkable, fluent, rapid, and ready" speaker.

David Ramsay was born in a one-room stone cottage in Pennsylvania. He was the son of a poor Irish laborer who, while illiterate himself, recognized the genius of three sons: William, Nathaniel, and David. All three of the Ramsay brothers were to graduate from Princeton with honors.

At age 6, David Ramsay was tutoring others and held a regular teaching position at a good academy at age 12. When David qualified for the junior year at Princeton at age 13, the faculty decided he was too young and should enter the sophomore class instead.

In 1772, David Ramsay received a medical degree from the College of Pennsylvania. Dr. Benjamin Rush, the best doctor in the colonies, was Ramsay's mentor and champion. About Ramsay, Rush wrote: "He is far superior to any person we ever graduated at our college...his talents and knowledge universal."

A year later Ramsay set up a medical practice in Charleston and was soon involved in local affairs. He married Sabrina Ellis of a prominent family. She died within a year.

Ramsay served in the South Carolina legislature throughout the Revolutionary War. Arrested by the British, he was exiled to St. Augustine for a time. Next, Ramsay was elected to the Continental Congress. For a year he served as the president tempore in the place of John Hancock.

While in Philadelphia, Ramsay married a second time. His new bride was Frances Witherspoon, daughter of the president of Prince-

ton. Again, a tragedy befell. Frances contracted scarlet fever and died after bearing a son, John Witherspoon Ramsay. At her request, the baby was reared by the Witherspoons.

David Ramsay began work on his heralded **History of the American Revolution**. His father-in-law, Dr. Witherspoon, and his friend, Benjamin Franklin, gave Ramsay valuable aid.

Returning to Charleston, Ramsay decided to interview Henry Laurens ("Tower Henry") for his viewpoint. In 1787 Ramsay married Laurens' daughter, Martha. She bore him 11 children.

David Ramsay's son Nathaniel was the first South Carolinian to be vaccinated against smallpox. Dr. Ramsay sent to Savannah for the vaccine. Ramsay, otherwise a handsome man, had had one eye damaged by the pox in his own youth.

Charles Wilson Peale and Rembrandt Peale, America's leading portrait artists, both painted Ramsay so that his afflicted eye was not shown. David Ramsay's brother, Nathaniel, was a brother-in-law of the Peales.

Always busy, Dr. Ramsay wrote frequently for medical journals. For his writing he received an honorary medical degree from Yale.

Ramsay was a meteorologist and geographer. He had a "health map" drawn up. He believed that climate, forestation, and disease were inter-related. Ramsay was the first to use the terms "upcountry" and "lowcountry" to describe South Carolina geography.

By interest and temperament, David Ramsay had been described as Charleston's first public health office. In many ways his contributions to Charleston's civic life can be compared with the contributions of Benjamin Franklin to his beloved Philadelphia. Ramsay, however, was not destined to completely emulate Dr. Franklin's rags-to-riches success story.

Ramsay's father-in-law, Henry Laurens, was a very wealthy man, and from him Martha Ramsay inherited a considerable estate. Through bad investments, Dr. Ramsay lost his wife's estate and all that he had acquired, also.

Ramsay bought considerable stock in the Santee Canal venture, in a homespun manufacturing company, and in a Charleston water company. Each business held more promise than profits. All failed.

In 1811, Martha Ramsay died. Four years later Ramsay was shot four times in the back by a deranged man he had previously examined and pronounced insane. On his deathbed, Ramsay generously forgave the assassin.