CHESTER COUNTY CULTURE

1820–1840

BY MARGARET POWELL EHRLICH

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The needles eye that doth supply the threat that runs so true . . .

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FOREWORD

This paper is not a history of Chester County, nor even history of the beginnings of Chesterville. This paper is only one of many records attempting to present events that occurred in time.

The writer of this paper has chosen the topic to fulfill requirements for a graduate course in South Carolina history. The writer has not the slightest intention of pretending that the topic has been carefully surveyed. The writer is well aware of the fact that only the surface has been skimmed. It is indeed humanly impossible for one person to cover the vast amount of available material in three weeks time, the maximum for gathering data.

No attempt was made to be selective in events and names of persons. The writer had no argument to prove, no claim to verify or falsify. The events and names of persons that are mentioned throughout the paper appear simply to illustrate a time and place. The events chronicled are merely guides as to what the reader found, not presented to distort nor give erroneous impressions. The reader draws his own conclusions and they may vary greatly from those of the writer.

The writer has scrupulously checked and rechecked each source of information to the best of ability, and has voluminous notes of material gathered. The majority of the sources are primary, many taken from court records and documents. They are given to illustrate the events that shaped the fortunes of those who lived along the river and among the cotton.

In many instances the writer has, unfortunately moralized. Personal opinion slipped onto the manuscript. This was unintentional. The writer was attempting to interpret what was written and what had been said.

The writer became increasingly aware that history is not dead. It changes every day. As new facts are published, new interpretations must be given. One cannot long read family letters, wills, and documents without becoming conscious of a great discrepancy between their first hand reports, and novels, articles, and other written sources. It seems evident that many writers, historians, sociologists and others have colored their stories, and failed to fully put down that which is true. The writer saw a running thread from beginning to end.

One final word. It was not until the paper was assembled that the writer realized the paper was the story of a river, the resilient thread.

Bear with me in my song of praise,
And tell the world that, since the world began.
No fairer land hath fired a poet's lays,
Or given a home to man!

Henry Timrod
The Cotton Boll

There was a beginning, but where? In my family, to talk of ancestors and family trees was simply to remark, "You take after your German grandmother," or "he acts just like his Scotch-Irish kin." In early years the family would visit in Due West, S. C., a quaint little hamlet that seemed so "dead" on the Sabbath. To idle away the long meandering hours, one could cross the street and amble through the cemetery. There among crumbling granite, and broken wings of angels, the minutes crept by. Saddened when one read of tiny babes who died, of soldiers killed in "the war," filled with the heavy odor of magnolias, and pungent boxwood, one, nevertheless, could not fail to notice one consistent phrase on almost all of the older grave stones, — "come from Antrim County. One thing was sure in our young minds, there simply could be no one else remaining in THAT place. So one assumed the beginning was Ireland.

On other Sabbaths, the family would make a long, tedious trip to the heart of the blue ridge mountains to visit the "other side" of the family. To young, imaginative, adventurous minds, these trips were filled with excitement, as well as apprehension. There just might be some Indians hiding in those hills. We knew well the story of Boone and Sevier, for we could proudly claim kin. Maybe we didn't care about the blue bloods, for we had red blood, strong Indian blood kind, in our veins. This was the beginning?

The seeds of the quest had been planted and were quietly growing. Through the years the question persisted, "where was the beginning?" Then, suddenly, quite recently, one realized that the question had been handed down to one's sons. Sitting by a sparkling mountain lake, watching a drama unfold, a drama written and directed by one's son, a drama of dreams and visions of the magnificent Atta-Kula-Kula, one understood.

A mountain, a river. A beginning.

PART ONE
THE BEGINNING

If you can look into the seeds of time
And say which grain will grow and which will not
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favors nor your hate.

William Shakespeare
Macbeth

King Cotton was a symbol of the southland in ante-bellum years. The picture of the fields, white with cotton, of colored peoples, bent low with burdens of labor and heart, is traditional throughout most of the world.

There seems to be two pictures that center around cotton. One is that of the aristocratic gentleman planter, living in a columned mansion, giving orders to the overseer; one who possesses hundreds of slaves, and thousands of acres of land; a picture of the ill-treated negro slave, of the harsh and brutal tyrant overseer, a picture of all night dances in the big house, a picture or hams and bacon in the smoke house, and the money rolling in.

The other picture is one of poverty, "the corn-pone" and "hominy grits" south, the illiterate, brave young soldier, and the very young, bare-foot "white trash gal."

Of course, neither of these pictures are readily accepted today. The columned mansions of the gentleman planter are but a memory. The illiteracy and rough manner are nightmares of the past. Both pictures are distorted and unreal; yet, in a sense, they have veritable meaning. Both pictures are rooted in southern soil and both are dominated by a supreme monarch, King Cotton.

Whitney's cotton gin made it possible to seed more cotton in one day than fifty men had previously been able to do. The cotton gin set the southerner on a rising turbulent mountain that finally erupted in a war.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, South Carolina was producing about 20,000,000 pounds of cotton in one year. By the year 1821, the state was producing 50,000,000 pounds a year and it rose to 65,000,000 pounds in 1834. King Cotton reigned the south. Each decade saw the crop double until 1860 the south was supplying two-thirds of the world cotton market.

By the year 1845 diversified farming in South Carolina had all but vanished. Cotton crops monopolized the better lands and absorbed all labor. King Cotton was omnipotent, excluding all else, even the profitable still.

Possessed with the mania of owning land and slaves, for a man's prestige was measured by his land holdings as well as the number of slaves he owned, people began moving south and west in search for land. There were some in the north who detested the cotton symbol as a commodity, but others coveted the fluffy white stuff.

The years between 1820 and 1830 were years of crises in South Carolina. As early as 1820 warnings were being cried, but the prophesies went unheeded. There were some who proclaimed the results of a one-sided industry and there prophetic pronouncement soon took real form.

South Carolina had seen her bright years of economic prosperity, being, in 1821, second only to New York, in exports. A few years later she sank to the old figure and rising again in 1836 and becoming rather stable in exports in the years thereafter. However, by the year 1830 a gloom was overshadowing production in this state, for the cotton production had been reduced and the number of negroes still rising.

Two things were hurting South Carolina in her efforts to build a stable economy. One was competition which resulted in severe cut-backs of cotton production, and the other was the terrific burden of housing and feeding the negro slave. Other states were beginning to raise better cotton and more cheaply than South Carolina. The slave was becoming a problem, not only from the increase in population, but from agitators who kept him quite stirred up. The white man did not share ownership of land with the ever growing population of negroes but he had to share living with them. Having turned a deaf ear to diversified farming, the land owner was having to turn elsewhere for corn and other crops to feed those demanding subsistence.

In 1845 Joel Poinsett, one of the most versatile of all the sons of South Carolina, speaking before a convention of the South Carolina Agriculture Society, placed agriculture above all other pursuits in life. He warned his listeners, however, of the folly of just one crop. Not only did he urge diversified farming but urged the farmer to experiment with fertilizers and crop rotation, alternating with fields of clover, wheat, and others, then, back to cotton.

By mixing Peruvian quano with manure, vital elements could be returned to the depleted soil. Another means of returning fertility to the soil was increased use of cattle, utilizing more land for pastureland.

With the economic depression in the state more people were leaving the state. The influx of immigrants had slowed to a trickle and this decreased power in the state. Poinsett noted the poverty in the state, and urged the farmer to maintain upkeep on the farm in the way of replacing worn, broken fences, and to eliminate unkempt home lots and fields. In this way the farmer might induce immigrants to settle permanently in the state.

Poinsett suggested that the able leaders of the state seek industries in order that they might come into the state and use home-grown products. There were some rifle companies in this state, along with iron works, carriage makers, pottery manufacturers, and others, but cotton completely dominated all productions.

But from the standpoint of invasion that would come with the war between the states South Carolina could realize her fortunate position in not having all her wealth concentrated in cities and industries. As Merle Counter has stated in his book THE SOUTH DURING RECONSTRUCTION: 1865-1877, "The south, at the end of the war would still have her soil, her waters would still flow, the sun would still rise in the east and set in the west. There would still be climate, winter would follow summer, as always. The tree and the grass would continue to turn green in the spring and seeds continue to sprout."

There was enough woe and want, ruin and devastation to satisfy the most insatiate heart after the war. South Carolina suffered extensively. Two-thirds of the south's railroads were destroyed. The south was a wilderness of blackened chimneys, crumbled walls and mutilated

trees. Stately oaks had been ruthlessly cut down. Those homes that were not burned were stripped of furniture. A generation of men were lost. Out of a white population of five million about a quarter of a million did not return. The young who did return were often wounded into economic incompetency.

One saw an era of order of gentility and proud, rich, aristocratic culture disappear forever. But the greatest loss was of spirit and hope. In the end, however, some began to overcome their despair. Nature would respond with those who had the will to work."

The law of nature still prevailed. This, then, is the beginning.

The river action is the chief agent for carving the scenery of the land. As the water, falling as rain on higher slopes, descends by gravity, sliding down the cold gray mountain, cutting for itself ravines and valleys, gliding through red hills, and through black bottoms, converging into rivers and seeking outlet in the sea, it seems, according to author Henry Savage, "to run like a green resilient thread through the world's best, speaking to man of the days before his coming."

Rivers cut up high plateaus, carve magnificent mountains, and then, bit by bit, eat away the mountain until it drops into the sea. The mountains, (or often referred as the "red hills of Carolina,") of South Carolina are said to contain many of the earth's oldest rock formations. North and West, the primary job of the river is carrying to the sea all the land of its basin above sea level. The southern and eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge mountains, from the point where the three states, South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina converge in the neighborhood of Grandfather Mountain, provide the streams and rivulets that feed into the river systems which flow through the Santee into the sea. Savage, in his book, River of the Carolinas: The Santee, states that the water flowing from these mountains "flow some four hundred fifty miles to cover the bee-line distance of about two hundred fifty miles."

One often speaks of the "source of a river," but a well developed river system has many sources, just as the trunk of a well developed tree has many branches. At the fartherest tip of the branches from the trunk, the bed of the stream is steep and the waters swift. As rivers rise close to their basin, the waters are rapid and gradually diminish until the fall becomes quite gentle. The waters began to flow, tearing and pulling everything in its path, traversing with torrents of variable flow, ruthlessly furnishing constant erosion action and depositing materials over the plains. When the waters become gentle, the power for carrying away the soil is not as great.

If one is prone to search for the source of the rivers that flow through Chester County, one must begin at the southern slope of the Appalachian Mountains, which have the heaviest rainfall region in the country. The two rivers, the Broad and the Catawba, that are in the up country have their source primarily from the southern slopes of Grandfather Mountain. The water, slipping from streams and brooks, drained from rainfalls, flows into Linville river. The water emerges and falls ninety feet into man made Lake James. The water that flows out of the west converge with water flowing out of Linville streams to form the Catawba River. For no apparent reason, the waters change names and become the Wateree. The Wateree runs into the Congaree and the two become the Santee River. The major portion of the Santee River empties into the Cooper River which flows by the eastern portion of Charleston and into the sea.

Whenever he goes to the city, people know
He's a backwoodsman, and they pity him
For what he is for what he cannot.
. . . he is a stranger
A stranger and a fool in a foreign land.

Any yet, if those who hold him in contempt
Could visit him at home, they should soon find
His wisdom matching theirs in a different way.
Him their superior.

With such a man of self-sustaining strength
Even an urban arch-sophisticate
Feels foolish and a stranger in a land
More lordly than the country he has known.

Archibald Rutledge
The Backswoodsman

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