

# South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

Jan 1, 1981

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Every South Carolina school child knows that the poinsettia was named for Joel Roberts Poinsett who brought the beautiful Christmas flower to America from Mexico. It is doubtful that one in 1,000 South Carolinians could cite any other accomplishment of Poinsett, who was one of the most gifted and versatile men the state has ever produced.

Poinsett (1779-1851) was the son of a distinguished Charleston physician of French Huguenot descent. He received a broad education, chiefly in London, at the University of Edinburgh and at England's Royal Military College.

Gifted in languages and inheriting enough money to indulge his love of travel, Poinsett early acquired a cosmopolitan outlook.

The handsome, dark-haired Poinsett seemed to do everything well. As a politician, he served South Carolina as a state legislator (1816-20). As president of the Board of Public Works, he demonstrated his capacity for practical solutions.

Poinsett served as a member of the U. S. Congress from 1822 to 1825 when he resigned his seat to accept President Monroe's appointment as minister to Mexico. It was not Poinsett's first experience with Latin America. Ten years earlier he had assisted the Latin American colonies in their fight for independence from Spain. In Chile, where he was known as the "Apostle of Liberty," he became a national hero.

Like Thomas Jefferson, Joel Roberts Poinsett had an abiding faith in the American republic. He also believed that young people of talent deserve the opportunity to develop their gifts for the common good.

Poinsett, while Van Buren's secretary of war, always managed to send bright young army officers abroad to study. He chose John C. Fremont to explore the Mississippi and Missouri River basin and sent Charles Wilkes as head of a South Seas expedition, which increased our knowledge of that area.

It was Poinsett who got S. C.'s Robert Mills the assignment of designing the Treasury, Patent Office, and Post Office Buildings in Washington.

Poinsett was devoted to the fine arts. He sponsored young artists, assisted in the establishment of numerous professional journals and was himself a worthy student of the ancient Etruscan and Mexican civilizations.

Perhaps Poinsett's greatest contribution to learning was in his establishment of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science in Washington which was the forerunner of the Smithsonian.

In today's world it is difficult to appreciate the importance of the S. C. State Agricultural Society of the pre-Civil War period. The society attracted the liveliest and best minds of an era in which the term "specialist" was unknown. When no college major in agriculture was possible, the society had numerous committees composed of

those who pursued individual research and wrote up their experiments for the benefit of others.

Poinsett long served on the society's Committee on Cattle and attempted to discover which breed of cattle best withstood the lowland climate. He repeatedly recommended crop rotation and irrigation, neither a practice of his time.

Poinsett exchanged seeds and plants with a worldwide network of friends and distributed them to other S. C. experimenters.

For his personal enjoyment, Poinsett established landscaped gardens that were considered models for others. It was as an amateur botanist and gardener that he introduced the poinsettia to the United States.

Poinsett was interested in everything from improving the fire power of army artillery to the education of school teachers. (He recommended a teacher training college at least 50 years before S. C. acquired one.)

His skill and knowledge, particularly in foreign affairs, were so well known that he was sought out by Presidents Monroe, Adams, Jackson and Van Buren. In fact, he was offered more "special missions" than he was able to accept.

Poinsett never wavered in his devotion to the National Constitution. Always a citizen of the world, he nevertheless believed that the American republic was man's greatest achievement.

It is ironic that the school children of Chile know more about Joel Roberts Poinsett than do the school children of S. C.

