

Educator Shurley's diary reveals difficulty of times

John Rooker Shurley (1818-1863), educator, kept a diary from 1847 until his death. In the diary, he wrote of his family as well as about his pupils.

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NEARBY HISTORY

In 1847, when his diary opens, Shurley was nearly 30 years of age and was living near Winnsboro, where his school, the Shurley Institute, was located. Shurley, a York District native, had married Martha Ann Leitner, daughter of Col. George Leitner of Winnsboro.

Shurley Institute was larger than most academies. Boys were sent there from all over South Carolina, and beyond, to be prepared for college. The institute's graduates became doctors, lawyers, ministers and judges and included at least one governor.

The diary begins with Shurley's wedding day, Dec. 8, 1847. He reported that a large assembly witnessed the nuptials and that the witnesses joined the bride and groom for a marriage feast. The table was in the shape of a cross and was "beautifully adorned and decorated with a superabundance of the richest vian(d)s and all manner of sweetmeats."

It was a happy marriage. Shurley wrote in his diary, "There is no pleasure of happiness equal to that resulting from marriage if one gets so good a wife as I have."

They had a son, Leitner Shurley, who was destined to become a great educator, at least as admired as his father.

His beloved wife, Mary Ann Leitner Shurley, died Oct. 11, 1850. Not only did Shurley not write of her death, but it was nearly two years before he continued the

diary.

Then, beside the date August 1852, he wrote "I was married to Miss Mary Ann, the third daughter of Alexander and Margaret Fewell of Ebenezer." Mary Ann was 13 years younger than her husband.

In his diary, Shurley praised his mother-in-law as "one of the best and kindest of women," and said she made everyone feel at home.

Ebenezer was a village of an estimated 20 families with an A.R.P. church, which had an academy attached. Shurley became the headmaster of the academy, which became known as "the Athens of York." Today the village is incorporated into the town limits of Rock Hill. In 1852, Rock Hill was only a railroad stop, while Ebenezer was known as a "thriving village."

In September, Shurley wrote, "When I first awake I solemnly devote myself to God for the day. Read several passages of scripture and then spend as long time in prayer as circumstances permit. Read two chapters in the Old Testament and one in the New, and meditate thereon." About school he wrote that he "let not one moment pass unimproved."

Shurley's school flourished. As in Winnsboro, boys were sent to Shurley from over the state and many of them were to have outstanding public careers.

The diary had a long entry for Dec. 20, 1860, when South Carolina seceded from the Union. In early 1861, he wrote, "The firing of Fort Sumter precipitated the bloody war. They call it the Civil War but nothing more uncivil ever happened in this country."

Shurley had a farm near Winnsboro and in March he went down to inspect it and, no doubt, consult with his farm operatives. On the train there were a number of fellow passengers headed for

Charleston to volunteer in the Confederate Army.

The diary tells of the birth of a son, Barron Beauregard Shurley, on March 21, 1861. On Jan. 5, 1862, Shurley wrote about the death of Barron: "Mysterious are the ways of Providence." A daughter, Fannie, died not long after. Four of Shurley's nine children died before reaching the age of 10.

By mid-1862, scarcity of foodstuffs had set in. Shurley wrote on May 26: "Provisions of all kinds are very high. Butter is selling at 35 cents per pound, coffee not to be had. Molasses \$1.75 per gallon and everything else in proportion."

On May 31, 1862, "Our armies require bread and farmers in general have planted the greater portion of their land in corn, planting only cotton enough to keep seed to plant another crop should the times be favorable for planting a full crop."

The Winnsboro farm was, by this time, being operated by Shurley's mother and young son, Leitner. Between school sessions from June to July, Shurley stayed in Winnsboro harvesting the crop. He only made 29½ bushels of wheat in comparison with the previous year's yield of 73 bushels. He sent 15 bushels of the wheat to the mill to be ground for his mother and Leitner. The remainder was sent to Ebenezer for his family there.

When Shurley returned to the Winnsboro farm in September, he could report that he had a fine crop of fruit to send to Ebenezer along with a half-dozen watermelons. When he returned, he found that his 6-year-old daughter Sallie had died of scarlet fever. She was his third child to die.

Shurley's own health suffered. In his last year, he taught his students while lying on a couch. He died March 15, 1863.