

Immigrants sewed finery for plantation soirees

During the Great Depression, a few of the unemployed in each state were hired to interview elderly folk whose lives would illustrate the rich texture of the American experience. The project, called "American Life Histories," produced manuscripts for the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940.

On March 11, 1938, Wood Dixon found 82-year-old Jane Hutchinson in her garden, hoe in hand. She lived on three acres of land near the village of Monticello in Fairfield County.

Hutchinson had been recommended for the interview because she was "an authority on unpublished local history."

Dixon began his interview asking Hutchinson about her own life story and learned that her father and mother, Archibald Hutchinson and Anne Jane McCullough, came from Ireland. They landed in New York and gradually worked south to Monticello.

Her father was a tailor by trade and her mother a seamstress. Hutchinson carefully explained that her parents didn't attend the

dances and parties that were such a large part of plantation life but that they sewed the fancy clothes that the partygoers wore. She remembered the broadcloth coats, nankeen trousers and showy waistcoats her father made for the men.

In the years before the Civil War, her mother stayed busy making riding coats, polonaise dresses and riding skirts. (According to the dictionary, polonaise dresses had a fitted bodice and draped cutaway skirt, worn over an elaborate underskirt.) Hutchinson marveled at how well the women rode spirited horses sidesaddle.

Her mother also made hats — "the larger the hat and the more ostrich plumes on it, the more fashionable a woman was regarded."

Hutchinson pointed toward a house where Gen. Judson Kilpatrick, Sherman's chief of cavalry, had his headquarters in the spring of 1865. She called it the "Turkey Jim Davis house," and Dixon asked why that name. Jim Davis, or James Bolton Davis, was one of the largest cotton planters of the South. The Sultan of Turkey invited Davis to come to Turkey and show the Turks how to plant, cultivate and gin cotton. Davis was a grandson of Capt. William Kincaid who, many claim, was the

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man who really invented the cotton gin — saying that Eli Whitney saw the Kincaid gin and built one like it and got the first patent.

When Davis left Turkey, the sultan showered him with gifts, chiefly a fine Arabian stallion, some mares, a jackass, cashmere goats, some Brahma cattle and Shanghai chickens. Hutchinson said that it was the appearance of the Shanghai chickens that caused his neighbors to call him Dr. Turkey Jim Davis.

Hutchinson also remembered a neighbor, John Hugh Means, who had been governor of South Carolina 1850-52. Governor Johnson of Alabama got some grass seed from Egypt, which he called Egyptian

grass, and sent some of the seed to Means. Means planted the tough weed, calling it Johnson grass, although his neighbors called it Means grass. The troublesome weed spread rapidly and has plagued the South ever since.

Another nearby historic spot was the Old Brick Church that dated back to 1788 and is the church building where the S.C. Synod of the ARP church met for the first time. The church had celebrated its 150th anniversary two years before.

Hutchinson had been told that the bricks in the church were made by men who went to the brickyard and tramped the mud with their bare feet, placed the mud in molds with their hands and placed the molds in the sun to dry. While the bricks dried the men gathered wood to burn in the kilns night and day.

The Old Brick Church survived in spite of primitive brick-making techniques and in spite of Yankee soldiers tearing out the flooring and using it to construct a bridge over the Little River in the wet spring of 1865.

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