

THE
SOUTH CAROLINA
HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1959

VOLUME LX

NUMBER 4



THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
CHARLESTON, S. C.

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A NORTHERN PROFESSOR WINTERS IN COLUMBIA, 1852-1853

Edited by MARGARET DESCHAMPS MOORE

University of Mississippi

Alexander Taggart McGill, a Pennsylvanian, spent the winter of 1852-53 as professor of ecclesiastical history at Columbia Theological Seminary.¹ A noted clergyman who in 1848 had been moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, he moved in a circle composed of Columbia's prominent Presbyterian families. He made his home with George Howe, then professor of Biblical literature at the Seminary and later author of the well known *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina*.² Among McGill's friends were the president of South Carolina College, James Henley Thornwell,³ and the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Benjamin Morgan Palmer.⁴

The visitor wrote frequently to his wife and children who remained in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and some of these letters have been preserved in the Presbyterian Historical Society in Pennsylvania, which has given permission for their publication. They picture the graciousness of the Howe family and their friends, and the charm of social life in Columbia. Homesickness, dislike of slavery, and yearning for privacy kept McGill from experiencing very real satisfaction during his stay in Columbia, and at the end of the school term he returned to Western Theological Seminary where he had previously taught.⁵ Yet, throughout his letters one detects a wistful yearning to bring his family South and become a part of a society which both attracted and repelled him.

Columbia June 19, 1852⁶

My dear Mary,

I am greatly delighted to know, that you are so much better: and I am very impatient to get home once more, and see all my dear children. "There is no place like home"; however kindly I may be treated among

¹ For a brief sketch of McGill's life, see Alfred Nevin, *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1884), 494-95.

² 2 vols., Columbia, 1870-83. For a sketch of Howe, see *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1928-44), IX, 286-87.

³ See Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, 1875).

⁴ See Thomas C. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Richmond, 1906).

⁵ A year later he was elected to the chair of ecclesiastical, homiletic and pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, from which he retired in 1883.

⁶ McGill was in Columbia at this time probably to make arrangements for the position he later assumed.

strangers. I do not know how you would like this country for a home. Negroes are plenty; gay people, elegantly dressed, in fine carriages, and "faring Sumptuously every day," are plenty. And then the beautiful gardens, orchards, shrubbery and flowers, make the town itself like a Paradise to the eye. But all these things, you know, could not make us happy: if we did not feel ourselves to be at home. . . .

The sun is very hot, during the day. The thermometer is upwards of 90° in the shade: and yet, at this moment, a delightful breeze, passing through the house, dispenses with the need of a fan. People stay in the house all day: and then go forth in the evening; and fill the streets, with the gayest promenading. Young ladies are seldom seen with bonnets on: but, whether walking or riding in carriages, their heads are bare, with various decorations in their hair: and their dresses are very light and fine.

I was not well, yesterday, and the day before: but feel as well as usual today: only, that I am homesick. May God preserve you all safely and happily, till I see you again. . . .

Your affectionate Father

Alexr. T. McGill.

Columbia Dec. 28, 1852

My dear Wife,

I am here at length, after a tedious and not pleasant journey, either by land or sea. Through the kind protection of God, the dangers of the ocean, at this boisterous season, have been safely passed; after more than ordinary peril. In going out of Cape Fear river, our vessel came into a collision with a Brig of immense size, and the concussion was dreadful. Our prow was shattered, a mast was broken, and the guards which protect the deck from the waves were driven in—yet the steamer went on in the passage, through a raging sea, which made me very sick. We arrived in Charleston on Saturday evening instead of morning: and of course, too late for the train to Columbia. . . . I arrived here late, yesterday evening—Dr. Howe meeting me with his carriage, on my way to the Hotel, and urging me home with him.

I feel very sad and gloomy, this morning; though in usual health. Every thing turns up comfortless to my mind. The difficulty of obtaining a good boarding-house is much more than I expected: and I may conclude to put up, finally, at one of the Hotels. I would rather incur additional expense there, than go to any of the houses, which have been mentioned: but, as yet, it seems impossible for me to feel at home; though

the climate is delightful. . . . The number of students here is about 30. They are toiling away, without any recess for holidays.

In a few days more I shall give you a more satisfactory account of my arrangements here, and my impressions. . . .

Very affectionately your husband,
Alexr. T. McGill.

Columbia, S. C. Jan'y 18, '53

My dear Wife,

I have just read yours of the 11th, inclosing the note from Mr. Knight, etc. It is always pleasant to get your half sheets and the Tuesday on which I commonly receive them is now a very welcome dawn, leaving me, as it does, to expect a green spot more pleasant by far than any of the sweet gardens and evergreens among which I sojourn. But I must not turn poet, in my old days of love. Your letter, full of dollars and cents, looks rather business like to kindle a poetic enthusiasm. That Bill of Spencer's. . . . My household is nothing compared to Dr. Howes. He used *thirty* bushels of rice last year, as one item. This, at 6 dollars a bushel, is 180\$, for rice alone. His salary dont more than half support him. But his wife makes it up: with her plantations of rice, sugar, and cotton, in the South of Georgia. She raises the rich Sea Island Cotton, which sells for 45 to 75 cents a pound.

I hardly know what to do about my boarding. Having been invited to remain with Dr. H., and a snug little room having been fitted up for me, I dont know how to withdraw, without leaving some impression, that I am not entirely satisfied. Besides, Mrs. Howe is rapidly regaining her health, and is able to resume her domestic empire, and seems to treat me as if I were one of her family. Added to all, and more than all, the extensive library of Dr. H. more than makes up for my own, without the trouble of borrowing, and of lugging armfuls from the public Library. But just as soon as I can get out, and get a good place I shall transfer myself.

This morning the thermometer stood at 26°—the lowest of any day this winter and considered *very* cold weather. The negroes were all congealed and if they could be frozen all away, I would not be sorry. I have great trouble in a cold day to get my fire kept up, by the lazy, lying and deceitful rascals. They know I don't whip, neither do I pay; and they dont care whether I freeze or not.

Columbia, S. C. Feb. 3, 1853

My dear Wife,

I have just recd. your last letter. . . .

Since I last wrote, our house here, has been visited by a sad calamity—the death of Dr. Howe's second daughter "Marion" nearly seven years old. She was an exceedingly fascinating child—the idol of the neighborhood. Some 12 days ago, she complained of sore throat, and her mother, having lost a child before by croup began to attend early to the child, administering the usual remedies. But the disease made progress slowly, even after it was thought to be subdued. The most skillful physicians of the town were baffled: and suddenly, on Sabbath evening last, it was found that the larynx was swelling with frightful inflammation and the breathing became like a shrill whistle. The Physician brought his instruments to open the windpipe below the seat of inflammation, in order to give artificial breathing through a tube, until the disease could be arrested above. But it was found, that the inflammation had gone down too low: and the little sufferer was given up.

On Monday morning, after she had ceased to speak, and struggling in agony for breath, she beckoned to her mother to come into the bed—which she did: and then turning round, she kissed her mother convulsively, nestled herself in her bosom, and expired—while even the Doctor thought she was getting some relief, and going to sleep! You can hardly imagine a more touching scene, than that of the mother, gently looking down upon her features, as she hoped that it really might be so—and then with a sudden scream, cry out—"Oh she is dead"—My child is gone."

Yesterday, we had the funeral solemnities—A very large concourse assembled—Dr. Leland⁷ officiated, and I was assigned a seat with the mourners. In going to the grave, Dr. L. and myself preceded on foot the distance being only a few squares. The students, as pallbearers walked on each side of the hearse, then followed all the servants of the family, behind whom the family carriage came next with parents and children, and then a long procession of elegant carriages. Altogether, it has been a solemn and saddening occasion to my feelings. The stricken parents seem almost inconsolable, being both peculiarly devoted to their children. I sorrowed for them most, when I thought of my own little ones. Ours exactly corresponded before—3 boys and 2 girls. How frail and uncertain is our hold on these dear creatures! I wish you would

⁷ Aaron W. Leland was professor of theology at the Seminary. See F. D. Jones and W. H. Mills, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina Since 1850* (Columbia, 1926), 424.

write a letter to Mrs. Howe, somewhat, or altogether after the fashion of one which I shall put on another page.

There is quite a concourse of strangers from the North in Columbia, this winter—from Philadelphia, New York, Boston &c. There is no doubt of its salubrity, in general. The pinewoods and sand hills, which skirt the town, are proverbial for freedom from sickness of every kind. I have not had a cold, since I came here, although there has been a great variety, in the degrees of temperature: and, if I were *at home here*, I think my health would be good.

Dr. Smyth,⁸ of Charleston, is here, delivering a special course of Lectures to our Students. He is very able and eloquent. The Board of Directors met today and resolved to erect additional buildings, at a cost of 10,000\$. They made arrangements for my inaugural at the close of the session, in June next, I having declined to be inaugurated now, and yet not willing positively to say I would not be inaugurated at all, until I see what Providence will indicate more plainly. If the Allegheny Directors do things handsomely, in May next, my purpose is to return to Pa., as a more suitable field, on the whole, for *me* to be *useful* in. But, if the spirit which actuated them last summer, show itself, in the least, and if they do not wipe out honorably to me the impression made by their resolutions, I cannot return: but shall either stay here, or go to our farm. *You* could live here pleasantly. But I must give place to the letter which I bespeak for Mrs. Howe and that, if you please, *without delay*.

It is a most lovely day. I have been writing and reading in my room, without fire all day: but the necessity of walking, as usual, for exercise obliges me to defer the remainder of my letter, till tomorrow. . . . I am glad Mary entertained her visit on Ruth Bradford, without discussing abolitionism. Crazy as her Father is, on the subject, I respect him more, than a certain minister from Pa. graduate of Jefferson too, who has got negroes by marriage, and buys and *sells*, without remorse, as it suits his interests or feelings. I turned with ineffable disgust today at a small affair, in his conduct towards the mother of a girl, he bought at public sale, not long since. But I must tell it to you hereafter. I am forgetting to close *my own* letter as I promised above; doubtless, because it is so pleasant to keep talking to you. Give my love to all. Tell Bella, that she need not be impatient to get a husband in Pa. if she means to come South. There is a fine lot of good mechanics

⁸ Thomas Smyth was pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Charleston. See *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVII, 377-78.

here, who make plenty of money, and would make good husbands: but are not just "the caste" for planters' daughters.

Your affectionate husband

Alexr. T. McGill.

Columbia, S. C. Feby 10, 1853

My dear Wife,

Time has borne me into the 7th week of my exile, and instead of making it more tolerable, I begin to feel, at times, that I can stand it no longer. . . .

Matters go on as usual. So many *little* engagements in the Seminary keep me occupied; so that I have no time for visiting unless on Saturday: and I scarcely go anywhere. I have not returned Dr. Thornwell's visit: and yesterday he paid me another, with great courtesy and kindness. He is the most important personage in town, not excepting the Governor himself. The brilliancy of his talents, his great learning, and his position, combine to give him ascendancy of influence.

Dr. and Mrs. Howe still mourn sadly for their little "Marion." They had two Daguerreotype pictures taken, after her death, in different style of costume, which they seem to have all the time in their hands. . . . I have not yet said anything to Dr. Howe about my boarding; in consequence of his trouble: and I shall soon need more money to pay up. No one says a word to me about money. And I do not speak of it, of course, until my quarter is up. Then, if it don't come, I shall relieve the Institution quickly of my burden. In the meantime, I wish you to send me twenty dollars of any good Southern money. . . .

I have just plucked a flower or rather bud off a sweet briar at the door; and send it to "my dear little Etty". . . .

Your affectionate husband,

ALEXR. T. MCGILL

Columbia, S. C., March 17th 1853

My dear son John Dale,

About the figs—they don't get ripe till June—two months yet. Oranges cost about as much here as they do in Allegheny. It takes a great deal of money to live here—there are so many niggers, to eat every thing up. We will soon have strawberries and peas to eat, in Co-

lumbia. The best thing we have to eat yet, is sweet potatoes, which have been kept all winter. They are delicious: and plenty of them can be bought for half a dollar a bushel. That is cheap.

Little George Howe has got well again—I wish my sons were as fat and rosy as he is now. . . . Be good boys, both of you.

Your affectionate father,

ALEXR. T. MCGILL

Columbia, March 24, 1853

My dear Wife,

It is rather tantalizing, that the mails are so badly managed, that two of my letters always intervene before I can get an answer to the third one back: which is almost forgotten, when your particular notice of it comes to my hand.

I am hesitating, whether to hand Mrs. Maitland's letter to Mrs. Howe, for several reasons—1st. Because she is busy preparing for a journey to her plantation, in the South of Georgia, intending to take her children with her, and to be absent for a month or more: she has evidently no time, at present, to go about among her friends, to procure the arrangement, which Mrs. M. desires; and it would scarcely be discreet, to solicit her attention, under such circumstances: she might feel annoyed—not being able to comply with the request, and yet unwilling to refuse the favor. 2nd. Because, the season at which Mrs. Maitland proposes to come, is near the time when the school terms break up here, when young ladies have become weary of long application, and are all intent on arranging for summer travel and recreation. 3rd. Because *visits of observation* from the North, are peculiarly distasteful to these Southern people, at the present time. It looks like coming to spy out the land; or coming for a temporary object of the visitor, without feeling any interest in the country, or caring, at all, to be identified with its citizens. As I said before, the best way to get a good place is to come on at once, at the right season; and let the people become interested in the personal application and actual presence of the stranger. They don't love Northern people enough, to do any thing they can help, to *fetch* them, unseen and unheard, lest they should fetch abolition in some shape, or unfriendliness to their "Institutions." It is only because I was regarded as half a Southern man, that they ever sent for me. These considerations and a general impression of the failure which would attend this plan lead me to doubt whether I

should give the letter. Perhaps, however, I may give it, tomorrow. At any rate I shall inquire into the practicability of getting a class, etc.

...

Your affectionate husband

ALEXR. T. MCGILL

Columbia, March 31, 1853

My dear Wife,

Here I am, in a large house, without a solitary tenant, but myself. Dr. and Mrs. Howe and their four children are all gone to Georgia, leaving me and some twenty negroes, to take care of the premises, for a fortnight. I had gone to one of the Hotels and taken a room, but Dr. and Mrs. Palmer who reside on the adjoining lot insisted very politely and pressingly on me to "share their loaf" and keep my place in Dr. Howe's house. Dr. Leland and his wife proposed the same thing; and a Mrs. Young, a lady of prominence, in Presbyterian society, urged me to take lodgings in her house, so that I have had many invitations. Dr. Palmer's being first, and Mrs. Howe appearing anxious, that I should not leave their house, and there being the advantage of books etc., I have concluded to remain; probably, until I leave for the North which will be about four weeks hence. My present calculation is to leave here on the 27th of April (Wednesday) and reach Pittsburgh, the 30th (Saturday evening).

I have drawn from the Treasury here \$666—four months salary—including the month I labored last summer. Of this sum I have paid Dr. Howe 60\$ for three months boarding—being the rate of genteel boarding houses here—He said he would not have accepted anything, but for the fear that I would not feel independent—and that, if he charged anything at all, it would be the usual price of board, in the best houses. This was all right, of course: and yet I would have given 50% more, at any time, in order to feel "free and easy" at a hotel. I must pay the niggers more yet for washing, blacking, brushing, bed making &c. . . .

It appears, you are not favorable to the Princeton movement. . . . One thing is nearly certain to my mind, that, if you come to Columbia, you will not be willing to leave it again. It is just the place to please you. Its charming walks and gardens, delightful circles of female society, balmy climate, fattening food, and ebony hands to dress it, will take such a hold of your local attachment that you will refuse to move, any more. Are you then prepared, to become permanently identified

with the South in general, and South Carolina, in particular? That is the question for prayerful and deliberate decision, *very soon*, and finally, I am just informed, today, from Phila., that my nomination will be voted by a large majority, of the Princeton Directors. Shall we plant our children there, in that ancient seat of learning and religion—or bring them to the sunny South, and mix them up with its institutions and its destiny—or will you stay at Allegheny? . . .

Columbia is notable for fruitfulness in *clergymen's* families. Dr. Palmer, not yet 35, has had five. Dr. Thornwell, nine &c. I dined, sumptuously, at Dr. Thornwell's last week. His wife is one whom you would like. She was rather anxious to learn what could be known about you. She is a *Witherspoon*—grandniece of the great Dr. of that name⁹—simple, kind, and yet highly refined in her manner. . . .

Your affectionate husband

ALEXR. T. MCGILL

Columbia, April 7th. 1853

My very dear Wife,

I begin to understand, why homesickness is considered by French Physicians, a disease, and a bad one. Mine has almost come to a paroxysm, within the last few days. The peculiar condition of my family—the absence of the other Professors at Charleston, attending Presbytery—my utter loneliness, and the pressure of other heavy solitudes, which you know all combine to render my stay irksome, to the last degree. I have lost my appetite: and for the last week, have literally forced myself to eat anything at all. . . .

The negroes of my establishment are in great tribulation—"Joe," the carriage-driver has been nearly killed. His Master left him particular charges, to use the new pair of blooded horses every day, in a light wagon, hauling manure, wood, &c., in order to keep down their mettle. But he contrived to let them run off, affrighted by the Railroad cars; and they dashed everything to pieces, nearly killing him, and ruining their own tractability hereafter. It matters little, whether I stay about the house or not—they pay no obedience to me, whatever—excepting the woman who attends my chamber, and one of her little boys. They, however, are kept attentive by money. Dr. Howe is a poor master—a mixture of weak indulgence and particular strictness—magnificent in outlay, one while, and pinching in parsimony another. . . .

⁹ John Witherspoon, noted Presbyterian clergyman, was president of the College of New Jersey and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

I have double or treble seminary duties, this week—have to visit the sick in the absence of the Pastor, and to supply his pulpit on Sabbath. It is the first time I have consented to preach, since I came—having only participated in addresses at the communion. I mean to try two sermons, as an experiment, if I am well enough. But if I am not better tomorrow, than I am today, I shall escape to Chesterville, and leave a licentiate in the seminary to preach in my absence. . . .

Your own affectionate husband

ALEXR. T. MCGILL.

Columbia, April 21, 1853

My very dear Wife,

The joyful news of another daughter came on two wings, in the same mail—one from the pen of Dr. Dale—and one from that of George and Mary conjointly. Of course, I was relieved and happy. . . .

This is probably the last letter from me—this separation. Next Wednesday I start for home, if no disappointment intervene. Dr. Howe starts about the same time, for his family in Georgia. I have told him the secret of your sickness: and it has greatly relieved his mind: for he had the suspicion, that you remained behind through repugnance to the South. He says "Ladies are very shrewd. Mrs Howe conjectured, long ago, this reason, for Mrs. McGill's detention." I suppose Madam Gossip has put it on the wind, by this time. Some ladies look archly, when they ask about you, now. Though I have displeased the whole circle of my lady acquaintance by visiting little or none, I must say, that so far as I can judge, it is the most delightful circle of the kind, I have ever known. It is settled in my mind, that you would be pleased with Columbia. But—I have no room to expand or explain the "But"—at present and must bid you goodnight—hoping and praying that you will get well very fast and fine—and that "baby" will keep growing and good until I get home—doffing its tawny skin, meanwhile, and looking just like the other babies, George and Mary and Tan and John and Etty—to all of whom I send love along with a double portion to yourself.

Your own affectionate husband

ALEXR. T. MCGILL