

THE
SOUTH CAROLINA
HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

JULY 1970

VOLUME 71

NUMBER 3



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SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
CHARLESTON, S. C.

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THE DEAS-THOMSON PAPERS IN AUSTRALIA

JOHN HAMMOND MOORE *

Mitchell Library, located on a high hill overlooking Sydney's magnificent harbor, is such an unlikely place to find a large body of South Carolina material that perhaps the first question to be answered is *how* these letters, account books, wills, journals, and legal documents—some six hundred items relating to South Carolina (1770-1830)—came to be deposited there. The answer lies in family connections between Scotland and South Carolina and the chance appointment of a young man to a distant colonial post.

This collection centers about the activities of Sir John Deas Thomson who died in Scotland in 1843 and his son, Sir Edward Deas Thomson (1800-1879), a commanding figure in Sydney's political, cultural, and educational life during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.¹ Both men spent some years in America. Sir John, then plain John, came to Charleston in 1784 in a vain effort to clear up financial confusion arising from the American Revolution and the demise of several relatives. At first a factor in Charleston, he later became a planter in the Stono area. And for a time it appeared that residence in the New World might become permanent. He became a United States citizen, married a local belle (Rebecca Freer, daughter of John and Susanna Freer), and invested heavily in cattle, land, and slaves. However, in 1791 Thomson and his young family sailed for his native Scotland where he rose to prominence as accountant-general of His Majesty's navy. Meanwhile, William Robertson, a Charleston lawyer and a brother-in-law, continued to manage the local Thomson holdings.² His letters and those of various members of the Freer family give some insight into the

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¹ See Charles Alexander Harris, "Sir Edward Deas Thomson," *Dictionary of National Biography* and a more detailed account in the *Dictionary of Australian Biography*. Thomson's grandfather, John Thomson, Sr., a naval storekeeper, was married successively to Catherine Deas, Janet Middleton, and Anne Fryes. NOTE: This survey of these papers has been prepared with the cooperation and kind permission of the Mitchell Library at the Public Library of New South Wales, Macquarie St., Sydney.

² By her will of 1817 Susanna Freer made bequests to two surviving children, Rebecca Thomson and Susan Robertson, wife of William Robertson, and to several grandchildren. "Will of Susanna Freer," dated May 16, 1816, proved Aug. 18, 1817, Charleston County Wills, XXXIII, Book C (1807-1818), 1278-1279, S. C. Archives.

Charleston scene during the 1790's and the early years of the nineteenth century.

Then, in the fall of 1826 the elder Thomson dispatched his son Edward to America. Ostensibly this young man was to travel to South Carolina in a final effort to settle family accounts.³ Of greater importance, Edward was in fact hunting for a job—not in America, but in British government circles—by gathering all possible information concerning U. S. naval life. In December 1826 John Thomson wrote from Scotland:

My whole Heart & Soul, my dear Edward, is centred in making this excursion of yours contribute, by every possible means to your future pursuits and welfare. . . . Let no stone be left unturned to make the most of the Caro. property—but let it be done as *quickly* as possible and nothing done to create the suspicion that it is any Amount, as it would be very embarrassing here— My most anxious wish & desire is to dedicate all that joyfully can be spared from other pressing demands . . . towards the establishment of John & yourself in life.

During the next ten months a lively trans-Atlantic correspondence ensued as Edward reported on this "excursion." Clerks in his father's office carefully copied extracts which were circulated to several important officials, among them William Huskisson (1770-1830).⁴ These extracts include praise for Yankee ships, details concerning navy yards in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, considerable de Tocqueville-like analysis of American life, and some general description of the North American landscape. From New York City, where he took special note of steam engines under construction, Edward wrote: "I went over the *Ohio*, *Washington*, & *Franklin* & three very fine ships they are. The Steam Ship the *Fulton* has been stripped of her machinery and converted into a receiving ship—although she must be considered a very wonderful production for the time she was built, she was by no means

³ Most published accounts, including that in the *DNB*, state that Edward Thomson came to S. C. to settle the estate of a deceased brother, but this seems incorrect. Instead, as M. E. Osborne writes in the *Dictionary of Australian Biography*, Edward's goal was to take care of his mother's affairs. Soon after he was born, Rebecca Thomson became estranged from her husband, children, and her own family. She returned to Charleston about 1805, and letters in this collection indicate that she had little to do with either her husband in Scotland or with relatives in South Carolina during the next two decades.

⁴ Huskisson was at this time treasurer of the navy and president of the board of trade. Upon Canning's death, in August 1827, he became secretary for war and colonies under Goderich and Wellington, but resigned his cabinet post late in May 1828.

the terrible Engine she was represented in England to be and could only have been rendered effective in harbour service.”⁵

After a brief tour of West Point and the lower Hudson River (“which surpasses the Rhine much in grandeur, it is true it wants the addition of the old ruined Castles and their attendant Legends”), Edward went to Philadelphia which he thought extremely pleasant. It possessed fine public buildings, was much cleaner than New York, had waterworks complete with “the most simple and beautiful [machinery] I ever saw,” and with hospitals, asylums, and schools for orphans and the deaf and dumb seemed to abound with “noble institutions.”⁶ In Baltimore Thomson dined with the famed Charles Carroll (“he is a fine old Gentleman of upwards of ninety, in full possession of his faculties”), but found many aspects of that city disappointing. “The Ladies of Baltimore have been celebrated for their beauty, but as far as I could judge at present there is a considerable dearth—there are however a few redeeming specimens—The Society is undoubtedly inferior in every respect to that of Philadelphia.” Actually, he concluded there was not “a great deal to be seen.” To his disgust lotteries were paying for construction of a large Catholic cathedral and a questionable monument to Washington. “It is a large pillar very heavy and has a *Beehive* on the top, which patiently awaits a Statute, but no one could inform me whence it was to come.”

On the 30th of December the thirty-five mile stagecoach trip to Washington consumed an “intolerable” six and one-half hours; and, to his surprise, Edward found they were scarcely out of the woods when “the Capitol was before us . . . It is a fine building unquestionably, but the *tout ensemble* has not a good effect.” He found the Senate and House chambers “extensive,” admired the “splendid rotunda,” and remarked that while the congressional library was “a spacious room . . . the collection of books is by no means numerous—a small appropriation of 1,000 dollars a year being all that is made.” He included a lengthy, but perceptive analysis of various aspects of British-American relations and internal conditions in the United States.

Thomson’s Washington visit included more navy yard tours, a series of brilliant diplomatic gatherings, dinners with several congressmen at the home of Henry Clay (whom he much admired), and two White House receptions. On New Year’s Day he went with the British minister to the annual presidential “Levee.” He found the diplomatic corps in uniform, other foreigners in evening dress, “but the Americans in boots, great Coats, and any thing they chose.” John Quincy Adams appeared to

⁵ Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Nov. 30, 1826.

⁶ Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Dec. 19, 1826.

be "a plain, cold, and formal Gentleman without any dignity of demeanour," but his wife was "a ladylike person and much esteemed."

On January 19 Edward Thomson departed for the South, still puzzled by this young nation and its capital city. Here was slavery and freedom, Indian chiefs dressed in feathers and epaulets, and a strange national assembly where a man could be a "good member" without having either "a genteel wife or pretty daughters."⁷

After crossing the Potomac, frozen solid by one of the coldest winters in decades, Thomson stopped overnight in Alexandria which was still reeling from a fire that had destroyed fifty houses. The next morning he began a harrowing sixteen-hour trip to Fredericksburg "over the worst road I ever travelled."⁸ He found the highway and the scenery much more pleasant from there to Richmond, spent the night, and then set off on a continuous, four-day jaunt to Georgetown, South Carolina. This journey included a hazardous crossing of the ice-clogged Roanoke River and brief stops at several "miserable Inns," Raleigh, and Fayetteville, arriving in South Carolina early on the morning of January 26, 1827.

At George Town there is absolutely nothing of Interest to a Stranger. It is a miserable place composed of wretched wooden Buildings, with here and there, however, a reputable House. You will be surprised to hear that I was obliged to remain here till the following morning for want of a Conveyance, as all my Endeavours to hire one were in vain—such a demand not being made above once or twice in a Twelve month. I however set out for North Santee on Saturday morning, about 15 miles, with a Horse who had no better qualifications than being broken winded and restive. My object was to reach Mr. H. D.'s plantation as directed by W. A. D. who had provided me with a letter to him.⁹ On my arrival I was mortified to find that he and all his family had been suddenly called to Charleston by the Illness of one of his Children, but finding that his Brother had a Plantation about two miles further, I proceeded to his Residence where I met with a most friendly reception from him.

After a stay of two days, Deer Hunting was proposed. The Hounds were not of the first order, mostly riotous puppies, and in all not making more than five Couples. The Huntsmen too were of an amusing descrip-

⁷ Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Jan. 4, 1827.

⁸ Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Feb. 3, 1827.

⁹ William A. Deas wrote Edward on Dec. 17, 1826, from Philadelphia, describing this region as "one of the most gay and hospitable parishes in Carolina," told him how to locate the plantations of his brothers, Henry and Seaman, and suggested he call on a third brother, Charles, when he arrived in Charleston. In this letter, filed in this collection, William also urged Thomson to study the rice culture and to enjoy a deer hunt while at North Santee.

tion, especially a little Negroe Boy called Hope, without Shoes or Stockings and with a flannel nightcap on his head; but he rode astonishingly well and with great rapidity through the Woods. We took our Stations, and I waited with much anxiety & eagerness for a Shot, as the Hounds opened and seemed to promise immediate Sport, but my hopes were soon dispelled by the deer turning and the yell of the Hounds gradually dying away. . . .

Mr. D. is a Rice Planter, and I understand he is considered one of the most intelligent in this part of the Country. I walked over the Fields with him and felt much interest in his description of the whole process of rice planting. I was also much interested in visiting the Negroe Houses and enquiring into the system of Treatment. On this plantation every thing seemed to be conducted with much humanity, but on an adjoining one I saw women working up to their knees in mud, and under such circumstances as we should consider too severe and cruel a Punishment for female Convicts. I was told this was not common, but I could not help feeling disgusted with a System which admitted of such an Abuse. These feelings and opinions I am very cautious to keep to myself, as there is nothing on which the Carolinians are more tenacious than the Slave Question. . . .¹⁰

After several weeks in Charleston, during which he arranged an undisclosed settlement of family matters, young Thomson retraced his steps to Philadelphia and New York. He then took a tour in company with a Mr. Hay through the Erie Canal followed by an unusual boat trip to Green Bay (Wisconsin) where he watched as American officials signed an Indian treaty. Thomson remarked to his father that the familiar "low bridge" was all too true on the Erie. Because of "innumerable" bridges it was impossible to remain long on deck. Some of these structures, he added, cleared the roof of the boat by a mere six inches! Yet, he found the scenery beautiful and waxed eloquent concerning the new waterway—"so noble a Work!" Throughout New York state he and Hay traveled from time to time with Captain Basil Hall (1788-1844) and his family; and, at Niagara Falls, on July 10, 1827, Thomson and Hall conducted several experiments designed to measure the velocity of the rapids.¹¹

After his return from the Great Lakes, Edward Thomson visited in Montreal, Quebec, and Boston. While in the latter city he expressed

¹⁰ Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Feb. 8, 1827.

¹¹ See Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (3 vols.: Edinburgh, Scotland, 1830), I, 177-205, for details of his visit to Niagara Falls. He does not mention Thomson by name, but tells of a trip to the falls on July 10 "in company with a friend."

surprise when his father suggested his letters be published. Actually, had he possessed more confidence upon arrival in America, Edward conceded a book might have been possible. "This unfortunately is now too late; more especially so, as Captain Hall will publish. One fact is certain, no good Book has yet been published on America; none but such touch upon the peculiarities of their Idioms and Customs; omitting the more interesting points of their Intelligence and unbounded Activity, as well as the Causes of their wonderful Advancement and Increase of Population."¹² Before traveling on to New York City to board a ship for home, Thomson toured several factories in Waltham and Lowell and was much impressed with what he saw.¹³

Following his return to Great Britain, young Thomson applied for the New York consulship, but failed to get the appointment. Then, in May of 1828 he accepted a post as clerk of the executive council of New South Wales.¹⁴ He arrived in Australia late in that year and, as a result of both fortunate marriage and innate ability, became by 1850 perhaps the most powerful individual in that new colony. Anne Marie Bourke, whom he married in September 1833, was the second daughter of the governor, Sir Richard Bourke. Three years later, despite cries of nepotism, Thomason became colonial secretary and registrar of deeds, offices he held until 1856 when representative government was established.

The Deas-Thomson Papers consist of eight carefully arranged volumes. The first four relate to Edward Deas Thomson's travels in America and his subsequent career in Australia. The last four (also numbered I-IV, but subtitled "The South Carolina Papers") are concerned with his father's activities in S. C. They include the following materials: Volume I has 84 items (1773-1816), among these are John Thomson's naturalization papers and details concerning his business affairs in Charleston; the wills of John Deas, Alexander Inglis, and Elizabeth Middleton; and various documents relative to an apparently doomed effort to give young Charles Stanyarne an English education during the 1790's. Volumes II and III contain 423 letters (1784-1822). Most of these are concerned with John Thomson's residence in Charleston; many are from English and

¹² Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Sept. 13, 1827. He enclosed a kind personal note from Hall and commented upon the death of Canning.

¹³ Edward Thomson to John Thomson, Sept. 30, 1827. In this letter, while discussing the tariff, he recalled that a Carolina gentleman "in high legal office" had remarked to him that if present policy persisted the South would have been "more happy & prosperous as colonies of Great Britain!!"

¹⁴ Thomson's acceptance preceded by only twenty-four hours Huskisson's departure from the cabinet following a disagreement with Wellington.

Scottish members of the Thomson and Deas families. However, after 1791 some of the correspondence naturally emanates from William Robertson and other South Carolina relatives. Volume IV consists of seventeen random account books (1784-1825), nearly all of them from Charleston.

The four "South Carolina" volumes, primarily eighteenth century material, have little political comment, but shed some light on social events. They are, of course, rich in details of the Deas, Thomson, Freer, and Robertson families. The first four volumes, largely nineteenth-century papers, contain little relating to South Carolina, the most important local correspondent being Susan B. Robertson, Edward's cousin and daughter of William Robertson, his Charleston host. After he departs she continues to regale him with details of a gay whirl of balls, dances, and races and urges his return. On August 28, 1827, she remarked in answer to a letter describing the trip to Wisconsin: "We are quite amused at your idea of making the Indians members of Society. My father thinks if you found any agreeable Squaws among them you must not, either you or Mr. Hay, bring them to Charleston as doubtful complexions would not be admitted to the Tertulia." She also told of a yellow fever scare, expressed fears that Major Alexander Garden ("long-winded" and "weari-some") was about to pay the household a visit, and inclosed a newspaper clipping telling of the Thomson-Hall experiments at Niagara Falls, adding, "P. S. Is Capt. Hall a single man and is he handsome?"

Eight months later Susan knew more of the captain and, although she did not meet him, did not entirely approve.

Capt. Hall and his lady visited Carolina in February; they were rather displeased we heard that Slavery should be continued in our unfortunate State. I do wish he could, as he is a clever man, teach us how to manage without it— There were several very cruel Sales among some of the oldest Planters and Slave-holders in the country when he was here and I am told he expressed great surprise at the vexation of the Negroes at being purchased by an upstart and their grief at their old Master's misfortune— I don't know what he did to get this strange nation's private notion in this matter for it is not very often they will let a stranger know what they feel.¹⁵

Although the Deas-Thomson Papers are obviously inaccessible to most South Carolinians and hardly warrant a trip of some 20,000 miles,

¹⁵ Susan B. Robertson to Edward Thomson, April 23, 1828. See Hall's *Travels in North America*, III, 123-202, for his description of life in this state.

they could prove helpful to genealogists and to those interested in the history of Charleston and the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁶ And, while every South Carolinian knows additional proof is not needed, they demonstrate once more the strong trans-Atlantic ties existing between South Carolina and Great Britain during those decades.

¹⁶ Since this collection is well organized, specific queries can easily be answered. The Mitchell Library possesses standard duplicating equipment.