

COUNT VON MOLTKE IN YORKVILLE

by Louise Pettus

Rose Hill Cemetery in downtown York is old and picturesque, with its gnarled crape myrtles and ornate ironwork enclosing graves headed by tilting marble tombstones.

It is obvious that the town's elite lie buried in Rose Hill. Still, the visitor hardly expects to read the inscription on one tombstone: "Here lies/ County O. P. A. Moltke/ born July 1, 28/ at Rounesholm, near/ Nastved, Denmark/Died at Yorkville/November 12th 1882."

A Danish count in Yorkville seems highly unlikely, yet there are records showing that Von Moltke arrived in York about 1875 or 1876 with his wife, Marie, and four children. The eldest son, Frederick, was born around 1870, and his brother, Harald Viggo, was a year younger. Amelia Andrea was 2 or 3 years of age. Only William O. Moltke, born in 1879, was born in America.

Much of what is known about the family comes from the pen of Harald Moltke, who lived until 1960, and in his old age wrote his autobiography, "Life Travel," in the Danish language. Harald Moltke became famous as a painter and Arctic explorer. He was with Knud Rasmussen on his trip to the North Pole and painted about 30 portraits of Eskimo life.

Moltke also painted the natives of Lapland, Greenland and Iceland. In his autobiography he wrote of his first venture in art when he began painting pictures in Yorkville. In his old age, he still had a sketch book dated Jan. 21, 1884, by his Yorkville art teacher, a woman whose name he does not reveal, but he does say that she nearly killed his native artistic ability by having him copy other drawings.

Harald Moltke said his father was the first to recognize and encourage his talent. His father was described as "a quiet, pessimistic man, who did not deal much with us children When company came, my father put me on his lap and then I had to try to cut out their portrait. . . ."

Moltke painted a galloping white horse that his family framed and put on the wall. Displaying art work was not a Yorkville custom, and his family owned only two other works, both brought from Denmark. Harald Moltke credited an early "inner impulse" with starting him on his distinguished career as a painter.

Besides practicing his artistic talents in Yorkville, Moltke first encountered there the Southern blacks who a little more than a decade before had been released from slavery. Moltke never questioned the notion that Negroes were "necessary" because of the hot Southern climate.

He called them "indispensable" in the town's kitchens as well as in the fields. He loved the blacks' "catching good humor and especial skill to dance" and termed the experience as his first meeting with "an amusing and original culture."

The Moltke children attended Kings Mountain Academy and learned their literature, American history and geography from a "tall old man with gray and full beard" and also two women. He said he learned his arithmetic so well that 60 years later he was still doing his arithmetic in English rather than Danish.

A diphtheria epidemic struck in 1882, causing Count Von Moltke's death within a few days. The mother never recovered from the loss. She was 32 years old and had four young children to care for. Some writers have speculated that the reason Von Moltke, a relative of the famous Prussian general of the same name, was in America and he had married below his social class.

The father had had money sent yearly from the entailed estates in Denmark but with his death the payments came irregularly. The family moved into a smaller house. Finally Marie asked her friend and former neighbor J. F. Wallace for help. He advised her to return to Denmark to look after the children's interests.

Marie Moltke and her four children left Yorkville in 1884 for Copenhagen. The Rose Hill Cemetery tombstone marking the grave of Count O. P. A. Moltke is what they left behind.