

The Altamaha Echoes

The Lower Altamaha Historical Society

September 17, 1987 P. O. Box 1405, Darien, Georgia 31305 Vol. II, No. 1.

OCTOBER EVENT TO BENEFIT THE BLOCKHOUSE BUILDING FUND

A walking tour of three historic Darien landmarks peopled by students in authentic vintage dress will be staged on the afternoon of the 25th, from 2 to 5, the last Sunday in October. Tickets may be purchased that day at the front desk of the old Darien Hotel and Cafe (187-), now McIntosh Square, for \$6.00, \$3.00 students, Advanced purchase prices will be \$5.00 and \$2.50 respectively. It is hoped that each LAHS member will be responsible for the sale of 10 tickets prior to the date.

Men and women's travel suits, dance attire and going away ensembles of a by-gone day will be featured as guests circulate while tea is taken at Tea Cup Tearoom there in the hotel. Classical music will accompany this segment. Wedding dresses and suits, christening gowns, judges' robes and widows' weeds will be seen at the Methodist Church (1841) accompanied by the strains of organ music peculiar to the Victorian period and before.

Across the street, also on Vernon Square, at Open Gates (1876), parlor music played on a 1902 Steinway will provide background music for at home dresses, childrens' clothes, doll clothes, lingerie and bathing suits. In a home furnished with collections of 19th century furniture, accessories, and clothing too fragile to be worn will be displayed on forms or by slides.

As one walks from place to place girls in period sports attire and walking suits will provide interest. Because of the uniqueness of this event and its historical significance we feel sure you will proudly support this effort.

The Thomas County Historical Society Museum, The Massie Heritage Center in Savannah, Jeannine Cook, Sheila Parker, Linda Miller, Kitty Greene, Isabel Thorpe Mealing, Minnie Lee Roundtree, Robert Moore, Holley Dean and Carolyn Hodges will supply the majority of the articles. Telfair Academy of Art and Sciences and the Jekyll Island Authority will add physical support.

Small promotional posters will be available to advertise the event. Anyone having contact with historical societies, church groups or the like within a one hour drive of Darien, please contact the Chairman, Mrs. Carolyn Hodges, P. O. Box 1526, Darien, Ga. 31305, telephone 912-437-6985, with appropriate name and address.

OLD FAMILIES OF McINTOSH COUNTY—II.

The Thorpe and allied families, continued from Echoes, Vol. I, No. 4.

Ann's son, William Thomas Harris, an army captain, then colonel in the Revolution and the first Speaker of the House in Georgia after the Revolution, married Mary Landree. One of their seven children, Jane, married Charles Joseph Washington Thorpe, and it was Jane's eldest son, Charles Courtney, born in 1816, who married Harriet Macdonald. A huge man, commanding in presence, Charles Courtney was apparently a conscript officer during the Civil War because he was too old to fight.

When Tunis Campbell, the black clergyman [who claimed] charge of Georgia's sea islands under General Rufus Saxton, was blamed for organising raids by ex-slaves on surrounding areas. Charles Thorpe was asked to talk to him. He went to see Campbell on St. Catherine's, but was captured by Union soldiers waiting for him and imprisoned him in Savannah. A Mr. Homer Peoples had taken refuge in a tree when Union soldiers appeared at his house, and overheard them talking of Thorpe's abduction. The Thorpe family gathered \$300. in gold, hidden down their well, Savannah citizens contributed \$200. and Rufus Lester (later a Senator) bribed the jailer to let Thorpe escape. Lester drove him by horse and buggy to the station to catch a train for McIntosh Station in Liberty County, but Thorpe was so weak after eight months' imprisonment it took him three nights to walk home to his family in Jonesville swamp, where they had taken refuge from their plantation, Lebanon, near South Newport. To be concluded in the next issue.

"Altamaha Echoes" is indebted to Mrs. I. T. Mealing of Darien for the above information and thank her most sincerely, Jeannie Cook.

BOOK REVIEW

Major Butler's Legacy: Five Generations of a Slave Holding Family: Malcolm Bell, Jr. The University of Georgia Press, June 1987, \$29.95, 673 pages.

On the eve of the bicentennial of our Constitution, Malcolm Bell has produced a book that in scope reaches far beyond the Butler family who owned Butler's Island near Darien and ran tidewater rice plantations in the great Altamaha Delta. It is not just a local or regional history; rather, it is a major work on the founding of our country.

Bell, in citing Samuel Eliot Morrison, called the drafting of the Constitution "a work of genius;" reconciling "unity with diversity" and was the United States' "most original contribution" to human liberty. Major Pierce Butler was one of the men who weakened the people's covenant by treating blacks as property. He drafted the fugitive slave Article (IV, 2, 2) and the "Three Fifths Rule" where a black slave was considered $3/5$ ths of a human being. Blacks are mentioned only indirectly in Article I, Section 2, part 3 of the Constitution of 1787. It states "Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states... which shall be determined by among the whole number of free persons, ... excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other persons." This flaw in our nation's social contract was not remedied until after many amendments to the Constitution and the American Civil war.

Major Pierce Butler (1744-1822) an ambitious younger son of an Irish baronet, derived a vast fortune by marrying Mary Bull Middleton, an heir of large plantations in South Carolina. Butler later sold these lands and his commission to buy and develop plantations at Hampton Point, St. Simons and Butler's Island at Darien. The book explores a rich and controversial genealogy by letting the people speak from their own letters or writings. Major Butler emerges as a contradictory person without redeeming features. Bell with discipline and penchant for understatement ends the book, "And it should not be forgotten that Major Pierce Butler and other South Carolina delegates helped to make the Constitution something less than it might have been."

Each chapter is documented. Numbered superscripts appear chapter by chapter as an appendix called "Notes." This documentation plus a rich bibliography is a sign of the eight years' labor to produce this resource for future scholars. In another appendix entitled "Personae," Bell (in the model of Robert Manson Meyers's *Who's Who in*

The Children of Pride) has given a detailed biographical sketch with references of all five generations of the Butler family, the relations and other figures, including freedmen. Certainly the most well known "Persona," eclipsing even the Major, was Frances Anne Kemble. Known as "Fanny." The English actress had a disastrous marriage with a third generation family member, Pierce Butler Mease who changed his surname to inherit the Major's name and estate. Fanny is described as a passionate, fierce and well loved woman. One of their children was Sarah Butler Wister who inherited her mother's spirit. She was romantically linked to the American novelist Henry James who once described Fanny as a volcano.

Bell's research raises fresh insights and interpretations of slave life. Bell also supports Fanny's view that the life of the slave was "wretched" (Refer to p. 441).

In the chapter "Enter Fanny Kemble" on December 30, 1838 the landing at Butler's Island "began to be crowded with Negroes, jumping, dancing, shouting, laughing and clapping their hands... to express their ecstasy at our arrival." This celebration provided a glimpse of the little known life of the slave. The "secret life" away from the eyes of the overseer or master, one can only speculate that the adaptation to the misery by the Africans in their ways and rhythms came to be known as Jazz. Thanks to the scholarly work of Bell, other Low Country history studies published since 1984, and to archeological excavations of the living quarters of slave, overseer and plantation owner's home, a picture of the living conditions of plantation life is being assembled.

In Malcolm and Muriel Bell's search of bits and fragments of old forgotten time, one of the richest finds was in an attic in Lenox Massachusetts. One happy moment for the Bells was discovering in the glassine envelopes the negatives of the 1915 photos by Amelia Watson of Butler Island and its people. These photos together with their own photos, some from *Drums and Shadows* taken fifty years ago, add greatly to the book. Two bequests by the Bells have provided permanent protection of the negatives and an indexing of the Butler materials in a once unfriendly Washington, D. C.

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library where they were turned away. Not all the legacy has survived, the Chestnut Street house in Philadelphia on the N. W. corner of 8th and Chestnut is now the site of a fast food store according to Malcolm Bell.

Bell describes two fascinating geographic features. The first was a place which grew cotton and rice in rotation in what is now deep *Spartina* marsh in the lower Altamaha and Buttermilk Sounds. This isolated cropland was called the Five Pound Tree where wayward, unruly slaves were sent. Five Pound Tree was exile for offenses not sufficiently atoned for by the lash. The second feature of Butler's Hampton Point on the north end of St. Simons was a cut-through directly to Altamaha Sound called Bram's Noble Ditch. Presumably a row,boat could leave Hampton Plantation at the beginning of a flood tide and go in a direct route to Butler's Island with favorable tides and river currents the entire distance. By Bram's Noble Ditch a journey of 4 1/4 miles from St. Simons to Butler's Island the time is shortened. While the journey by river is meandering and 2 miles longer. Thus Bram's Noble Ditch still visible but grown up in marsh grass made the communications between Butler's Island and Hampton Point more feasible.

Bell's background as a banker and financier allowed him to understand the financial, lineage and context of many documents, wills and accounts better than an historian perhaps could have. His original interest in the subject was generated by reading a small 1859 news paper advertisement of a slave auction by Pierce (M) Butler, Jr. Through a large cast of characters, Bell's book sings of America with all its faults, blind passions and strengths. The book reads like a novel with beautiful complex sentences. It will be a literary success and acclaimed on nationwide scale for its understanding and humanity.

Frederick C. Marland

LAHS Blockhouse Fund

Please send donations (tax-deductible to the extent allowable by law) to: Mrs. Lillian Schaitberger, Treasurer, Lower Altamaha Historical Society, Box 691, Darien, Georgia. 31305

FUTURE PROGRAMMES

- September 17th: Mr. Robert S. Davis, Jr. will talk about Land Grants and Land Records in Georgia, with especial reference to McIntosh County. Mr. Davis, recipient of the 1986 Award of Merit from the National Genealogical Society, is author of *Research in Georgia* and the soon-to-be-published *Georgia Genealogical Workbook*.
- October 15th- Mrs. Betty Bryde, Director-Curator of the Methodist Museum at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons, will talk about the history of Gascoigne Bluff and will dwell at more length on the lumber mill period and the recent archeological findings at Epworth.
- November 19th: Mr. Rusty Fleetwood of the Coastal Heritage Society at Fort Jackson, Savannah, will speak about the maritime history of this area, with particular emphasis on the history as related by small boats. Mr. Fleetwood is author of *Tide Craft* and an inveterate boat builder and researcher.
- December 17th: Ms. Evelyn C. Voelker, Associate Professor at Clemson University's College of Architecture, South Carolina, will give an illustrated talk on her recent research into the important role Blackbeard Island played in the 19th century as the South Atlantic Quarantine Station.