

The Altamaha Echoes

The Lower Altamaha Historical Society

August 17, 1989 P. O. Box 1405, Darien, Georgia 31305 Vol. III, No. 2

It is customary for the Midway Society of Liberty County to meet annually at their famous church, in the spring of the year. Usually in April, have dinner on the grounds, and a notable speaker for the occasion. This year on April 30th, it was the Honorable Charles L. Weltner, Justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia. Mr. Justice Weltner has graciously permitted LAHS to print his address at Midway, which contains an important reference to the Scots at Darien.



I AM deeply honored by your invitation to come—on this day, for this occasion—to this place. For it is a spot that occupies a unique place in the lives of thousands of people, such as you and me, and in the history of Georgia and the nation. My earliest recollections of Midway Church go back well over half a century, when my father, who loved the Georgia coast, brought all five of his children here to stop, and look, and play in the cemetery across the road, and to dream a little of times gone by. My latest recollection is some ten years ago, when, shunning the Interstate, my wife and I stopped here for an hour or two, breathing in the near-tangible sense of things past. Well I recall sitting on one of the raised vaults across the way on that unhurried spring day. I was alone in the cemetery—for a while. And then, two feet from me, there appeared a lizard, some five or six inches long. He looked at me, and I looked at him. Neither of us moved. I suppose that little creature intended to claim the spot as his own, for he puffed the membrane attached to his jaw, presenting, in its fiery red color, a daunting appearance. This challenge went on for four or five minutes, with no sign of retreat by the lizard. Watching him, I thought: *his* ancestors had occupied this ground for long millennia before mine began to emerge from barbarism. And even that was on the other side of the globe. It was *his* home, and not mine. So I retreated.

Even so, Midway Church has belonged to all of us, and its command over us will endure, I think, and I hope, for centuries to come. Each of you, as descendants and relatives of those remarkable men and women who made this place their home and spread its fame throughout the land—each of you knows far more of the legends and lore of Midway than I do, a visitor from the Piedmont. Yet, I can say this, with Dr. James Stanley: "Earth has produced but one Niagara, but one Mont Blanc, but one Lake Como. So it has given us but one Midway church."

So it is not of Midway, itself, that I would speak this morning, but of important events that took place within a few miles of here, 250 years ago.

Most Georgians know of the strategic importance of the Colony of Georgia as a buffer against the Spaniards to the south. And most know of the company of Scottish Highlanders that was recruited to come to our shores as a military force—small, indeed, but important. They settled a few miles from here in a district they called Darien, and built a town they called New Inverness. Some, perhaps many, of you are descendants of those Scots. Certainly, many of us are closely tied to the Presbyterian faith that they brought with them. (It is well-known that all but two of Midway's pastors were members of that denomination). Indeed, the roots of the Presbyterian faith in Georgia may be found but a few miles away. I quote the Reverend Frank King:

"January 19, 1736 was a mild winter day along coastal Georgia. Rev. John McLeod, from Isle of Skye, Scotland, newly ordained by the Presbytery of Isle, said to the Highlanders around him: 'Let us pray.' Thus was born Presbyterianism in Georgia, and Darien became its center."

Today, I wish to recount the details of a remarkable controversy that arose in the early days of the Trust Colony—one that involves, in a most dramatic and significant way, that Scottish community.



The colony of Georgia was a strange place. Its government was in the hands of a group of Trustees, one of whom James Edward Oglethorpe, who ran it mostly as he saw fit. It was a Trust Colony, as opposed to a Crown Colony directed by a governor appointed by the King. In 20 years, only three laws were passed by the Trustees. These prohibited slaves; rum; and trade with the Indians, unless licensed.

There was no ownership of land, but rather an unusual leasing arrangement, which effectively discouraged permanent improvement to the land.

There were no lawyers. John LaRoche wrote a letter to the Trustees in the earliest days describing Georgia as "a happy and flourishing Colony... free from that Pest and Scourge of Mankind called Lawyers."

But things in Georgia were not happy and flourishing for all of its inhabitants—or so they thought.

The problem, according to the community in Savannah, was the land tenure system and the want of slaves. In a letter dated December 9, 1734, over one hundred "Settlers, Freeholders and Inhabitants in the Province of Georgia addressed a memorial to the Trustees relative to their troubles, which they identified as: "I. The want of a free Title or Fee-simple to our Lands," and "II. The Want of the Use of Negroes with proper Limitations." They declared: "By granting us, Gentlemen, these two Particulars,

and such other Privileges as his Majesty's most dutiful Subjects in *America* enjoy, you will not only prevent our impending Ruin, but, we are fully satisfied also, will soon make this the most flourishing Colony possessed by his Majesty in *America*, and your Memories will be perpetuated to all future Ages, our latest Posterity sounding your Praises, as their first Founders, Patrons and Guardians; but if by denying us those Privileges, we ourselves and Families are not only ruined, but even our Posterity likewise, you will always be mentioned as the Cause and Authors of all their Misfortunes and Calamities; which we hope will never happen."

This letter evoked two responses, one from the *Saltzburgers* and the Inhabitants of *Ebenezer*," and the other from the Scottish community at New Inverness. The first wrote, on March 13, 1739, over the names of their ministers John Martin Bolzius and Israel Christian Gronau and of some 50 others: "We humbly beseech the honourable Trustees not to allow it, that any Negro might be brought to our Place, or in our Neighbourhood, knowing by Experience, that Houses and Gardens will be robbed always by them, and White People are in Danger of Life because of them, besides other great Inconveniences."

The other group, the Scots, wrote on January 3, 1739 (less than three years after their arrival) with but 18 signatures, expressing opposition to slavery on several grounds. The last was: "It's shocking to human Nature, that any Race of Mankind, and their Posterity, should be sentenced to perpetual Slavery; nor in Justice can we think otherwise of it, than that they are thrown amongst us to be our Scourge one Day or other for our Sins; and as Freedom to them must be as dear as to us, what a Scene of horror must it bring about!"

Here were three communities, demonstrating widely varying concerns: the English at Savannah—Profit; the *Saltzburgers* at *Ebenezer*—*Sicherheit*; and the Scots at Darien—Freedom!"

The insight of these first Presbyterians is a lasting legacy. Somehow they were able to see that the freedom which they claimed for themselves in this New World could not be denied to others. And it would be comforting to think that the clarity of that vision stemmed from the Presbyterian clergy.

But not so. For the Reverend John McLeod, their minister, did not join their brave declaration. Indeed, he *may* have moved from New Inverness by then, as the Trustees, meeting on Wednesday, June 28, 1738, adopted a resolution that "Mr. John McLeod have leave to surrender his present fifth Acre Lot at Darien to the Trustees."

On October 7, 1741, a meeting was held in Savannah, where 141 settlers made known their views by the appointment of one Thomas Stephens as agent for their affairs in Great Britain. They sought, among other matters: "That the *Use of Negroes*, under such Restrictions as shall be thought proper, be allowed for cultivating our Lands." Among the signers appears "John

M'Leod, *Minister of Darien*." (Sadly, the list included also some of those who signed the Ebenezer and the New Inverness letters.)

Moreover, an affidavit given in Charleston, South Carolina, on November 12, 1741, by "John M'Leod, late minister of *Darien*," attacks the Scottish resolve of January 3, 1739 as follows: "That the Petition signed by some of them against Negroes, and in Opposition to the Representation from *Savannah*, dated 9th of *December*, One thousand seven hundred and thirty-eight, (which was afterwards signed by some of those who did sign the said Petition) was wrote by a Person who had no Lott in *Darien*, an Officer in General Oglethorpe's Regiment, whom this Deponent has great Reason to believe, to have been sent by the said General to *Darien* on that pupose; knowing that the said Person had an Influence on some of that People, he being their Countryman, and formerly Master of the Ship in which the said People came to *America*."

No, the ember that glowed at *Darien* was not nurtured by Presbyterian clergy. Yet it flared all the same—the Truth as seen and spoken by honest and God-fearing men.



I have thought often of that strange tempest of a quarter millennium past. I have thought—"What if....?" What if the pure, radiant gleam of *humanity*, captured forever in those words on the paper that the Scots sent to London—what if *that* had become the prevailing standard for Georgia? What if, these centuries past, our forebears had, indeed, been able to understand that no "Race of Mankind, and their Posterity, should be sentenced to perpetual slavery?" What if we then had known, as did those Scots, that "Freedom to them must be as dear as to us?"

What if?

Well, there are a lot of "What ifs" in human history. What if the intellectual powers of Greece and the administrative genius of Rome had not collapsed into ruin, and lain buried for a thousand years? What if Western civilization had been able to move directly from the Ancient world to the Renaissance, and into modernity?

But it is, I suppose, useless to ponder upon such imponderables. Still, in thinking about this Scottish memorial to London, I am drawn again to that question—"What if?" What if all Georgians had taken note of the undeniable genius and power of that document? What if, true to the original prohibition, the colony (and state) of Georgia had *never* known of human slavery, save as some abomination across the Savannah River?

What if that which, in the New Inverness of 1739, was "shocking to Human Nature," had remained shocking to all of Georgia for another 250 years?

My God! What pain and agony would have been spared to millions of human souls!

Sadly, my friends, that is another "what if." That opportunity is gone. Passed. Lost. And we can profit very little by thinking of what happened because we did *not* seize upon it.

Is, then, all our recollection of the New Inverness resolve a mere rustling of old leaves? I think not.

We in Georgia have borne, and we have inflicted, untold misery by the failure to heed the simple truth, as it was written down by those brave souls of yesteryear. At last, in this 250th year since the writing of that remarkable document, we have, I think, learned, and accepted, its lesson.

There is another "What if," and one that is vastly more than mere historical musings. *This* one is grounded in the reality of the day.

What if, my friends—what if, having learned the lesson—what if now we should *forget* it!

What if?

I do not think that we shall forget—although there is always an element among us that would call us, subtly and seductively, back the "the good old days"—back to things the way they were; back to a narrow ring of perquisite and privilege; back to a regime in which the great mass of humankind are excluded from the bountiful treasures that the earth has to offer her children.

1927

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Make Check Payable to Lower Altamaha Historical Society

Is this a renewal membership?

Annual Meeting in May for Election of Officers and Directors.

Lower Altamaha Historical Society - P. O. Box 1405, Darien, Georgia 31305

Annual Membership dues, by May 1st.

But I do not think we shall forget. I do not think that God in his heaven will *permit* us to forget. Perhaps he has given to us this memorial from New Inverness for that very purpose—lest we forget!

"The grass withers, the flower fades;
But the word of our God will stand forever."

(Isaiah 40: 8)



HISTORIC STRUCTURES SURVEY

The State of Georgia is financing a coordinated survey of historic structures in there landscapes, under auspices of Historic Preservation Section, Dept. of Natural Resources. One county from each of the nine Regions of the State will be the subject in this survey. McIntosh County was chosen from the Coastal Region.

William Ryan Chapman, Assistant Professor, School of Environmental Design, University of Georgia—will coordinate the Historic Structures Survey in McIntosh County—building on surveys conducted in previous years by historic preservation planners of the Coastal APDC, aided by its Historic Preservation Advisory Council. Recently, a detailed survey of historic structures in Darien was conducted by the Historic Preservation Commission appointed by the City of Darien. LAHS members are committed to rendering all possible assistance to Mr. Chapman.

MEETINGS OF LAHS are held at 7:30 p. m. on the 3rd Thursday of every month. The place of meeting is currently at the Courthouse, Darien.

PROGRAM COMMITTEE: Ken Akins, Bill Haynes, and William Merriman
FUTURE PROGRAMS

August 17: Mr. F. Larry Evans has been a practicing registered architect for the past thirteen years. He founded Circle Development Corporation and the Phoenix Group architectural firm in 1984, specializing in the redevelopment and rehabilitation of historic properties. He was awarded the rights to develop the historic Jekyll Island Club property on Jekyll Island, Georgia in 1984. This award winning \$20 million rehabilitation project employed all preservation tools available including investment tax credits.

September 21: Buddy Sullivan will give a pre-view of portions of the history of McIntosh County, which he is presently compiling.

October 19: Mrs. Lloyd Y. Flanders has an interesting group of stories on the Georgia coastal islands from north to south.

November 16: Daniel Battle will share with us some of his experiences in his search for artifacts which relate this region to the human side of the Civil War.

December 21: Mr. Kevin McCarthy, Ranger at Fort Frederica National Monument will be our speaker, his subject, the Scots.