Joseph Burke
(550 East State Street)

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Biography Abstract of Joseph Burke

Joseph Burke was born in 1820 in Wicklow, Ireland. He probably spent some time in the State of New York before arriving in Savannah around 1841. He may have married Ellen Burchel Phelan in 1843, but, if he did, neither his wife nor any children they may have seem to have survived him. Burke's offices as a cotton merchant and exchange broker were at 66 Bay Street. He was also a founder and member of the Board of Directors of the Bank of Commerce. In 1854 Burke built a home for himself at 550 East State Street, where he lived until 1860. Over half of Mr. Burke's wealth (estimated to be almost $100,000.00 at his death) was in the form of real estate in Savannah. However, at the time of his death in November of 1865, Burke seems to have been out of the city, in New York. His property in Georgia was left in the hands of administrators until the final return of his estate was made in 1892.
JOSEPH BURKE

Joseph Burke was born in Wicklow, Ireland around 1820. Although it is not known when or why he immigrated to the United States, it seems probable that he spent some time in the State of New York before moving to Savannah. The earliest that Mr. Burke's presence in the city can be confirmed is 1841. He may in fact have been the J. H. Burke who arrived from New York aboard the ship Newark in the first week of February, 1841. In any event, letters addressed to Joseph Burke were received by the Savannah Post Office in July and August of 1841 and August of 1843.

Very few facts of Joseph Burke's life, other than the dates of certain property transactions, are certain. For example, although it is known that a marriage license for Joseph Burk and Ellen Burchel Phelan, the widow of Patrick Phelan, was applied for on November 7, 1843, there is some doubt that this marriage actually took place. And if it did, it seems no evidence of Mrs. Burke or any children they may have had can be found.

The record of Mr. Burke's property transactions is much clearer. For example, it is known that in May of 1848 Joseph Burke sold a 24 year-old male slave named Jim for $400.00. He also seems to have been a rather active cotton merchant and exchange broker at this time. His offices at 66 Bay Street in the Stoddard Building on the corner of Abercorn and Bay, were either very busy or very careless, for he was fined three times within ten days in February of 1853 (totalling $40.00) for blocking public streets with cotton shipments. In that same week he was also fined ten dollars each for four Negroes who were found working without their non-resident badges.

During this same general period (the late 1840's and the 1850's), Joseph Burke bought a great deal of property in Savannah. By 1860 his
real estate in the city was valued at $45,000.00 and his personal property at $15,000.00. Burk's purchase of Lot #15, Greens Ward in 1852 (for $800.00) is of particular interest because it was on the southeast ¼ of this lot (550 East State Street) that he built his own house in 1854 at a cost of $1500.00. Mr. Burke seems to have lived in this house (rated "notable" by Historic Savannah) for only five years. During the years that Mr. Burke did live here he was on the Board of Health for Green Ward (1855 and 1856) and served on the Superior Court Grand Jury (1859). It was also at this time, on May 10, 1856, that Joseph Burke and five other men founded the Bank of Commerce. This bank, situated on the northwest corner of Drayton and Bryan, began with a capital of $300,000.00. Mr. Burke remained a member of the Board of Directors of the Bank of Commerce (which the Daily Morning News said was composed of several of the city's "most enterprising and highly respected merchants") at least until 1863 and most likely until his death. He also owned ten shares (valued at approximately $100.00 per share) in the Mechanic's Savings Bank of Savannah.

On October 21, 1859 at 11 o'clock in the morning, the roof of Joseph Burke's house caught fire in several places from sparks which fell from the chimney. This fire, however, resulted only in the "burning of a few shingles" and thus does not seem to be the cause or reason that Mr. Burke moved from this house in 1860. Nevertheless, by June of 1860 Joseph Burke was living at the very respectable and elegant lodging and boarding house at 115-123 Congress Street known as the Screven House. This building on the southeast corner of Bull and Congress, facing Johnson Square, had been called "Mrs. Platt's" in 1837 and was a place where "decorum invariably reigned." Mrs. Platt
was "a lady of imposing presence" and it was said that "her guests could be assured of comfort" and an excellent cuisine.\textsuperscript{38}

Joseph Burke was involved in at least two law suits, both of which were decided in his favor. The first suit, in 1859, was a foreclosure on the mortgage of the widow Catherine H. Milledge and children, which resulted in the selling of certain lots of land to raise the needed money.\textsuperscript{39} The other known suit took place in May of 1865, after federal occupation of Savannah, and resulted in having the Second Provost Court order Thomas Houlihan to pay Burke (at the rate of $9.00 per month) back rent due for a house on Congress Street.\textsuperscript{40}

The years of the war most likely had a serious, negative effect on Mr. Burke's business as a merchant. In order to encourage direct trade of "wares and merchandise" to and from foreign countries, he helped form, with nine other bankers and merchants in June of 1863, an association called "The Importing and Exporting Company of the State of Georgia."\textsuperscript{41} From 1860 to 1865 Burke also began selling portions of the real estate he owned around Savannah.\textsuperscript{42} In 1862 alone he sold over $10,000.00 worth of property.\textsuperscript{43} But Burke was far from being either destitute or desperate. For, at his death in 1865, after the end of the war, his estate was estimated to be close to $100,000.00.\textsuperscript{44}

Although it appears the date of Joseph Burke's death was sometime in the first part of November, 1865,\textsuperscript{45} the causes and circumstances of his death are not clear. There is a difficulty in even establishing where he actually died.\textsuperscript{46} Court records in Savannah at the time of Burke's death stated that he died intestate and that a close business associate,\textsuperscript{47} John C. Ferrill, had been appointed general administrator of Burke's estate. But documents submitted four years later correct this
error and certify that Joseph Burke, as a citizen of the State of New York, had filed a will in New York on November 15, 1865. This date is confusing as it was on that very day that Ferrill had applied in Savannah for letters of administration to Burke's estate, thus indicating that he already knew of Burke's death. But whatever the exact date or place of Burke's death, the will he left seems to have changed little in the administration of his estate. Ferrill remained in control of Burke's real estate in Georgia—a duty that passed in time to three other men before a final return was filed in 1892.
"Chatham County Census for 1860," p. 194, entry no. 15, on microfilm at Savannah Public Library.

2This guess is based on the fact that Burke seems to have retained some ties to New York 25 years after he moved to Savannah. For example, not only was he described as being a citizen of the State of New York after his death, but immediately after the war, in 1865, Burke seems to have left Savannah for New York (perhaps to check on property he owned there?). This of course is only a guess—which hopefully can either be confirmed or corrected when information from the New York Historical Society (sent in reply to my inquiries) arrives.

3It is possible that Joseph Burke visited or lived in Savannah before this, but the evidence available cannot really support such a claim. A "Mr. Burke" is listed as a non-stereage passenger aboard several ships coming into Savannah in 1836 (Daily Georgian, 3 October 1836), 1837 (Daily Georgian, 8 August 1837), 1839 (Daily Georgian, 28 October 1839), and 1841 (Daily Georgian, 4 May 1841), but no first name or initial is given. Furthermore, as this was a time when other men named Burke were arriving in Savannah (for example: James E. Burke, see Daily Georgian, 11 October 1837 and Patrick Burke, Daily Georgian, 2 May 1841), it hardly can be assumed that any or all of these references are to Joseph. However, even though Burke would have been only in his late teens or early twenties at this time, Joseph's known interests in trade in his later life and the fact that he does not seem to have come here in the capacity of a common laborer make the possibility that he may have been, even at this time, involved in some kind of commerce at least worth keeping in mind. And although no Joseph Burke is listed in the "Chatham County Census of 1840," neither is he listed in the "Chatham County Census of 1850"—a time when Burke definitely was living in Savannah.

4Savannah Daily Republican, 9 February 1841.

5Daily Georgian, 3 July 1841; Savannah Daily Republican, 3 August 1841.

6Daily Georgian, 2 September 1843.

7Although the spelling of Burke here drops the final "e," it was not uncommon for this to happen. For example, when some property from Burke's estate was sold in 1869, Burke's name was recorded without the final "e" (Chatham County Superior Court Deed Book 4U, p. 264.)

8Ellen Burchel, spinster, and Patrick Phelan applied for a marriage on April 17, 1842 ("Marriage Records Abstracts, 1805-1852, of Chatham County, Ga.," Office of the Ordinary, no. 2437). They were married by Gregory Duggan on April 17, 1842 ("Marriage Records 1839-1371, 1890-1896," Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Book #16). Patrick Phelan, age 24, died October 10, 1942, less than six months later (Estate file no. 105, Office of the Ordinary, Chatham County Courthouse).

9"Marriage Records Abstracts, 1805-1852, of Chatham County, Ga.," Office of the Ordinary, Chatham County Courthouse, no. 2570.
The arguments for and against this marriage having taken place can be summarized as follows: Although the marriage license for Joseph and Ellen was applied for, the certification that the service had been performed was not entered in the record book (no. 2570) at the courthouse. Of course, the same is true of Ellen's first marriage a year earlier. However, this first marriage was recorded in the records of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (see note no. 8 above), whereas Joseph's was not. Perhaps, because Ellen had been a widow for only a year, it was considered too soon for the couple to marry. But it seems absurd that they would have applied for a license if that were the case. The argument against the marriage is somewhat supported by the fact that a letter for Mrs. Rhelan was retrieved by the Savannah Post Office in December of 1843 (Daily Georgian, 3 January 1844). However, if this letter was sent to Ellen (and no other Rhelans are listed in the Chatham County Census of 1840), the sender may simply not have known of her remarriage and change in name. It would certainly seem that Ellen would be financially pressed to marry, as her husband Patrick had left an estate of only $155.00 (Estate file no. 105, Office of the Ordinary, Chatham County Courthouse) and she seems to have had little or no family to fall back on (in fact, no Burches are listed in either the 1840 or 1850 census for Chatham County). But if Joseph and Ellen did marry, they were not living together in 1860. Yet no evidence of Ellen's possible death (which would explain why) exists in either newspapers, church records, cemetery records, or any of the other volumes or indexes listed in the Bibliography.

The "Chatham County Census for 1860," Savannah Public Library, (Microfilm) lists Joseph Burke as living alone in 1860. There is no mention of any children in any of the papers filed with his estate (file no. 368, Office of the Ordinary, Chatham County Courthouse) and none of the children named Burke who were baptised into the Catholic Church between 1840 and 1860 were his.

See "Index to Deeds of Chatham County, 1735-1910," Superior Court, Chatham County Courthouse, V. A-E.

Chatham County Deed Book, Superior Court, Chatham County Courthouse V. 3F, p. 91.

Chatham County Census of 1860," p. 194, entry no. 15.

Savannah City Directory for 1859, Savannah Public Library, p. 12. (Microfiche.)

Savannah City Directory for 1850, Savannah Public Library, p. 9. (Microfiche.)

Savannah City Directory for 1859, Savannah Public Library, p. 49. (Microfiche.)

City Directory for 1858, p. 12.

Daily Morning News, 11 February 1853, p. 2, col. 2, Savannah Public Library. (Microfilm.)
20. See note 12 above.


25. See following paragraph.


32. Mr. Burke is listed in the yearly newspaper reports of the Bank of Commerce every year before his death except 1851 and 1864. (Daily Morning News, 12 May 1856; 13 January 1857; 31 December 1858; 12 January 1859; 11 January 1860; 20 June 1862; 13 July 1863.)


34. Daily Morning News, 22 October 1859.

35. Chatham County Census of 1860, p. 194, entry no. 15.

36. This address comes from a picture of the Screven House that is on file at the Georgia Historical Society with other pictures of hotels in Savannah, box no. 13.


40. Savannah Daily Herald, 2 May 1865.

Deeds recorded at the Chatham County Courthouse (Superior Court) show that, until this time, Burke almost always had been buying, not selling, land.

Chatham County Deed Book, Superior Court, Chatham County Courthouse v. 3v, pp. 2, 39, 132, 139, 143, 150.

"Estate of Joseph Burke, 1865," Office of the Ordinary, Chatham County Courthouse, Savannah, Ga., Estate file no. 368.

John C. Ferrill applied for letters of administration on the estate of Joseph Burke on November 15, 1865 (Savannah Daily Herald, 22 November 1865).

Joseph Burke is not listed as having been buried in or removed from any of the Savannah cemeteries (that have record books at the Georgia Historical Society). Furthermore, as he was only about 45 years old at the time of his death, he might very easily have been on a trip away from the city and died after only a brief illness.

Ferrill, like Burke, was a founder of both the Bank of Commerce (12 May 1856) and the Importing and Exporting Company of Georgia (15 June 1863).

Document dated March 1, 1869 on file in "Estate of Joseph Burke, 1865," file no. 368.

See note 45 above.

"Estate of Joseph Burke, 1865," file no. 368.
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"General Index to Wills, estates, Administrations, etc. of Chatham County." Georgia Historical Society. Vol. I (A-K). (Typewritten.)

"Georgia 1950 Census Index." Georgia Historical Society.

"Index to Baptisms: June 27, 1855 to June 22, 1870." Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Savannah, Ga. Church records. (Handwritten.)

"Index to Chatham County, Ga. Census of 1890." Georgia Historical Society.

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"Index to Deeds of Chatham County, 1785-1910." Chatham County Courthouse. Superior Court. V. A-E.

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Maps
