EDWARD COPPEE, SAVANNAH PHYSICIAN

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Slavery was a bane to the progress of humanity, but it was vital to the economic prosperity of the sugar plantations of the West Indies in the eighteenth century. Thus was the case on the island of Hispaniola which today is home to the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. During the 1700's the western part of the island, called Saint-Domingue, became the richest of all of France's colonial holdings. By the time of the French Revolution in 1793, Saint-Domingue consisted of thirty thousand wealthy French, twenty-seven thousand mulattoes, and almost half a million black slaves. The revolution in France inspired the oppressed in Saint-Domingue to consider revolt themselves. At this time it became evident also that the mulattoes and the blacks would not be represented in the new French National Assembly while the white planters of the island would. The colony soon erupted in revolution as the black slave Toussaint L'Ouverture led an insurrection which saw the white French either dead or gone from the island.¹

Two lucky enough to escape the wrath of the revolution were a Frenchman by the name of Coppee and his wife Elizabeth. Along for the ride was their infant son Edward who, with his parents, arrived in Savannah, Georgia in 1793.² Savannah had been incorporated in 1789 and was coming in to its own as a port city in the 1790's. The Coppee family hoped to have a clean slate from which to start after their abrupt exile from their Caribbean home. However, their lives in the newly formed United States got off to a sad start as Mr. Coppee passed away soon after the family took up residence in Savannah. However, their grief was soon tempered as Elizabeth remarried on June 4, 1799.
Edward Coppee's new father was Dr. Charles Parseille, an eminent physician of the city. The term "doctor" had a much looser meaning then than today as no license was required to practice and there were few medical schools. In fact, Dr. Parseille operated a "drugstore" in addition to his medical practice where he sold various goods in addition to the medicines of the time. Parseille's pharmacy was located on Drayton street in Savannah and it did well enough to allow Edward and his mother to live in relative comfort. As Edward grew up his stepfather taught him the skill and the business of being a doctor. And so, young as he was, Edward became an apprentice to his stepfather.

Edward progressed enough so that early in 1812 he went into the business himself along with a partner, George Harrel. However, the union was short-lived as Mr. Harrel sold off his share of the "drug-business" in August of that same year. It was also in August of 1812 that Edward made his loyalty oath to the United States and became an official citizen at the age of 22. Edward was now an established part of the business community as the lone proprietor of his store. With his finances stable Edward married Caroline Raingeoar on May27, 1813 and settled down to raise a family.

The couple's first attempt at having a child ended tragically as did so many of the era of so little medical knowledge. In 1816 they had a son, Edward, but the boy only lived six months before he died after a brief but fatal illness. This illustrated the presiding helplessness of the time as even a doctor's son was not guaranteed to survive his formative years. The child was stricken with "spasms" and
passed on shortly thereafter. However, a short time after her first child's death Caroline was pregnant again. Alethia Coppee was the first daughter born to Edward and Caroline and she was followed by another girl, Eliza, who was born in November of 1819. The family continued to grow as the continuation of the Coppee name was insured by the birth of Henry's brother, Charles a short time later.

While his family grew, Edward's business prospered as well. Starting in 1820, he began to receive a variety of goods and medicines for his store via cargo ship from New York. His store was located in Market Square in downtown Savannah near the City Hotel. His location on the west corner of the city market proved to be advantageous for the selling of the "drugs and medicines" advertised in Savannah's newspapers of the time.

In 1821 the state of Georgia held a land lottery in order to distribute territory formerly occupied by the Creek Indians. Edward Coppee, as the head of the family, received two chances to win land in the form of two draws from the lottery. The lottery was open to all white males over eighteen and also to widows and orphans. Edward was rewarded with a plot of land in the DeLyons Militia District, land lot number 96, section 18 in Henry county, Georgia, which is located about midway between Macon and Atlanta.

Also in 1821, Coppee became involved with the Savannah Poor House and Hospital as one of its managers. He made regular visits to the charitable institution to inspect the facilities and by 1831 he was the head doctor there. Edward Coppee was becoming a very respected member of the community as he continually showed his selflessness and piety through his work in various organizations. For example, he was elected
to the board of managers of the Bible Society in March of 1822, while at the same time beginning what would become a decade of service on the grand jury. It was this jury which publically called for an end to corruption among city officers, for the institution of birth certificates, and for the fines of debtors to be paid off in installments so that the unfortunate could avoid jail terms. In 1823 Coppee began to sell "religious tracts" in his store and during the following year he was selected to be an officer in the Savannah Missionary Society. During this period the extremely vibrant doctor also participated in the local militia as a corporal in the second beat company. Alas, with all his other activities as well as the running of a business and helping to raise a family, Coppee was forced to endure a number of fines levied against him for missing parades and other military gatherings. In addition, Edward Coppee served on a grand jury committee which inspected and critiqued the jails of the city in order to make sure they were habitable.

In March of 1826, Coppee moved his business to the number two Young's building on Broughton St. between Jefferson and Barnard streets. This was done in order to establish a medical practice in the true sense because the following month Coppee received a medical degree from the Medical College of Charleston. Later in that year, Coppee moved his home to Broughton Street as well. With his degree the doctor added to his already considerable reputation as a respected citizen and businessman in Savannah.

Edward Coppee had been a member of the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah for a number of years. However, in 1827, he, along with fellow members George Faries, Lowell Mason, and Joseph Cumming felt the need to inact a Presbyterian church which would be more strictly
aligned to the presbytery. Their request for a new church was granted by the presbytery and the First Presbyterian Church of Savannah was begun. The members worshipped at Lyceum Hall located at the corner of Bull and Broughton streets until 1833 when they moved into a new building further down Broughton Street.  

A fire in 1829 destroyed the Coppee home on Broughton street and the family moved to a home on Bryan street which was considered a very respectable area in which to live at the time. The store on Broughton street remained intact, however, and Coppee continued his work on the grand jury, and as the Poor House Hospital physician. The number of Coppee dependents increased by one female as in 1830 Caroline gave birth to a daughter named Laura. The early 1830's saw Edward Coppee still firmly entrenched as a valuable member of Savannah society.

The Coppees saw their second daughter, Eliza, married at age 15 to Dr. John J. Mitchell of Savannah on November 4, 1835. Eliza was the first of the Coppee children to leave home and tragically, she became the second to die less than a year later despite the efforts of her husband and father. A fever took her life on July 30, 1836 and the young lady was buried in Colonial Cemetery in downtown Savannah. The family suffered yet another grievous loss when, on November 3, 1837, seven year old Laura died after suffering injuries from a fall.

Dr. Coppee managed to continue his business dealings despite his grief over the loss of his two children as he entered into a brief partnership with a Mr. Bowne. In 1836 the two expanded the inventory to include a great variety of items including candy, cough remedies, spices, cigars, tooth-ache remedies, and mirrors. Even after dissolving the partnership in late 1836, Coppee's store still sold everything from birdseed
to quinine mixtures. Coppee also kept his medical practice going apart
from the drugstore as well as his civic activities within the community
and the church.

In the spring of 1837 the Coppees took in a border, a medical student
who had recently studied at the Medical College in Charleston who was
eager to learn from the experiences of Dr. Coppee. The man was William
Bacon Stevens, a well-educated native of Maine who had traveled around
the world enriching his mind with a variety of experiences. Stevens became
smitten with Alethea Coppee and the couple was married on December 30,
1837. The two moved to Boston where Stevens finished his medical education
at nearby Dartmouth. They returned to Savannah and Stevens became a partner
with his father-in-law and began to practice medicine. Stevens went on to
become surgeon and doctor for the Central of Georgia Railroad and was
soon after made health officer of the port. In addition, he was elected
as secretary of the Georgia Medical Society and in 1839 helped to found
the Georgia Historical Society in which he served as recording secretary.
Edward Coppee joined his son-in-law as charter members in the Society
along with several notable citizens such as M.H. McAllister, Wm. Neyle
Habersham, and I.K. Tefft. Stevens later felt a call to the ministry of
the Episcopal church and in 1843 he and Alethea left for Athens, Ga. to
become missionaries. Stevens would later become an Episcopal bishop, write
a history of early Georgia, and help to found Lehigh University in Pennsylvania:
He and Alethea had three children before her death in the late 1860's and
the two never returned to live in Savannah.35

While Edward Coppee could find little fault with his daughter's
choice of a husband, he could be equally proud of his ambitious eldest
son, Henry. Henry matured in Savannah until he was 15 when he entered
Yale University which he attended for two years. He then returned to his
home state and worked in the construction of the Central of Georgia Railroad and also studied engineering until he turned nineteen whereupon he entered West Point. Henry would graduate eleventh in his class in 1845, and serve as an artillery officer in the Mexican War under General Winfield Scott. Promoted to captain for his gallantry during the war, Henry returned to teach French at West Point in 1848 and to marry Julia De Witt. Starting in 1855, Henry taught English Literature and would continue at the post for the next eleven years. In 1866, Henry became the first president of Lehigh University, and served for nine years in that position at the same time continuing his teaching of history and literature. During his career as an educator Henry wrote a variety of books ranging from military manuals published for the Federal Army during the Civil War, to English Literature texts, to religious works such as Songs of Praise in the Christian Centuries. Henry Coppee displayed many of the admirable qualities of his father as he proved to be a devout, educated practitioner of social grace who left behind a legacy of life's work when he died in 1895.36

While two of his children went on to lead happy and successful lives, Edward Coppee’s second son was less fortunate to a tragic degree. Charles Coppee died unmarried while attending Franklin College and his parents were left alone in their Bryan street house.37

With no more children to care for Edward Coppee decided that in 1839 it was time for he and his wife to explore other avenues in life. He remained active within Savannah society and attended the meetings of the Historical Society, but began to take a back seat to members such as his prominent son-in-law Stevens.38 In December of '38 Coppee had decided to leave the drugstore business and began to sell off his stock.39 He began
to liquidate and raise revenue in a variety of ways. First he sold his buggy and harness through an ad in the newspaper. Then he continued to sell off his merchandise throughout '39 and '40. Finally, in 1841 Coppee won a court case against one Margaret Beshoyer who had been renting a portion of his land. The area — garden lot number thirty, 80 east and eleven and a half acres located south of Thunderbolt road — had a mortgage due and in January of '41 Judge Charles S. Henry ordered Beshoyer to pay Dr. Coppee the sum of one thousand dollars. Later in that same year Coppee was able to take possession of the land after the mortgage was finally foreclosed. Edward Coppee continued to gather his resources as 1842 came and went.

It was early in the year 1843 that Edward Coppee and his wife Caroline said goodbye to the city that had been their home for fifty years and headed south to another storied port city. With no more children to raise and with his civic and religious duties in order, Coppee conducted a move to St. Augustine, Fla. in the spring of '43 and by July was offering his talents as a doctor to the populace. By August of that same year he was named Port Physician of the old Florida burg. The prestigious title was well deserved as Dr. Coppee set out to establish himself a respected niche in St. Augustine in much the same manner he had done in Savannah.
NOTES


2 Alien Declarations of Loyalty Oaths, 1812, s.v. "Edward Coppie (sic)" Georgia Historical Society.

3 Marriages and Obituaries From Early G.A. Newspapers, abstracted by Judge Folks Huxford (Southern Historical Press, 1989), 432.


5 Columbia Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 8 March, 1799, p.3., c.2.

6 Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, 1 January, 1812, p.2, c.3.

7 Ibid, 24 September, 1812, p.3, c.3.

8 Alien Declarations of Loyalty Oaths, 1812, s.v. "Edward Coppie (sic)"

9 Marriage Index, 1806-1851, Folio 27, 27 May, 1813. Savannah Probate Court.


12 Savannah Georgian, 16 November, 1824, p.2, c.3.

13 Georgian, 22 February, 1822, p.3, c.2.

14 Savannah Museum, 1 January, 1822, p.4, c.3.


16 Georgian, 4 December, 1821, p.2, c.3.

17 Ibid, 6 December, 1821, p.2, c.3.


19 Savannah Museum, 3 March, 1822, p.3, c.1.
20 Ibid, 21 June, 1822, p.3, c.2.

21 *Georgian*, 21 April, 1824, p.2, c.1.

22 Ibid, 21 June, 1822, p.3, c.2.

23 Ibid


25 *Savannah Georgian*, 29 March, 1826, p.2, c.5.

26 Ibid, 7 April, 1826, p.3, c.1.


30 *Register of Deaths*, vol. V, compiled by the Genealogical Committee 1989, p.75.

31 Ibid, 49.


33 *Georgian*, 25 June, 1836, p.3, c.3.

34 *Marriage Index, 1806-1851*, Follo 219, Sav. Probate Court.


37 Hardee, 162.

38 *Minutes of the Georgia Historical Society*, 1839-1843, typed from manuscript by G.A. Historical Society.


41Florida Herald and Democrat, 24 July, 1843; Daily Georgian, 26 August, 1843, p.2, c.2.
SOURCES CONSULTED

Alien Declarations of Loyalty Oaths.

Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography, 1887 ed. S.v. "Henry Coppee"

Bordley, James, and A. McGehee Harvey. Two Centuries of American Medicine.

Columbia Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 8 March, 1799.

Cyclopedia of Georgia, 1972 ed., S.v. "Land Lotteries"

Estate Index, Savannah Probate Court.


Georgian, Savannah Daily Georgian, and Savannah Georgian, 4, 6 Dec., 1821,
22 Feb., 1822, 29 Dec., 1831, 21 Apr., 1824, 14 May, 1832, 2 Feb., 1834,

Grantee and Grantor Deed Records, Court House Records Room- nn, 18-25;
00, 581; yy, 93; aaa, 464.


New York: Scribner's, 1930. S.v. "Henry Coppee" by L.H. Gipson;
S.v. "William Bacon Stevens" by E.M. Coulter.

S.v. "Haiti" by Rodman and Alexander.


Minutes of the G.A. Historical Society, typed from manuscript by the G.A. Historical Society, Sav., G.a.

Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, 1 January, 1812.

Savannah Museum, 1 January, 1822, 3 March, 1822.
Mr. Steven Edenfield  
124 Allegheny Ave  
Savannah, GA 31404

Nov. 18, 91

Dear Mr. Edenfield,

We received your letter from Nov. 2nd and the one forwarded from the Preservation Board. Evidently they do not answer letter of this nature.

The biographical file in our library does not contain any information about Dr. Coppee and we do not know how long he resided in St. Augustine and where he went from here. The only reference to Dr. Coppee I did find was in the Florida Herald and Southern Democrat from July 24, 1843, and I am sending you a copy of that particular page. I am also enclosing a copy of a page from the Dictionary of American Biography, which might be of interest to you.

I am sorry, but we are not able to tell you anything else about Dr. Coppee.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

(N. E. Martinsons, Genealogy)