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HILL GOWDY

The Image of a Man

Research Paper

for

Historical Methods 300

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Savannah, Georgia

Researched and Written

by

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27 February, 1980
This paper, which is of greatest importance to me and little significance to the world in general, is dedicated to my husband, who cooked while I wrote, and to my children, who had to solve their own problems, and to my "man in New York" , Vinnie O'Connell.
Hill Gowdy

An Image of a Man

Hill Gowdy is a reality of the past and an image in the present. The actual life began in Hartford County, Connecticut in 1819. He came to the city of Savannah as a commission merchant from New York in 1841, travelling back and forth between the two port cities for several years. He married, had a large family, carried on a business, and eventually left Savannah to remain in New York until his death in 1884. Somewhere within and around these bare facts was a real, warm, living man. We are left with only the cold traces and an image.
"The year 1819 is a red letter one in the world's commerical cal-
endar, for it was in that year that steam navigation of the ocean be-
came a reality." Up 'til that time it was only a dream of the few who
believed in the possibility of transatlantic crossings by steamship.
Savannah, Georgia helped furnish the proof that turned the dream into
a reality. It was from her shores that the first steamship left in a
successful attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean. A new era was about to
begin which would make Savannah a major seaport and trade center.

Another first occurred in Savannah which was directly related to
her importance as a major trade center; the first foreign shipment of
cotton made from the United States came from here. "The establishing
of a cotton trade was the keystone of Savannah's prosperity."

The year 1819 was probably a good year, if not a "red letter" one,
for a family in Connecticut named Gowdy. That was the year Hill Gowdy
was born in Hartford, Connecticut. The family name of Gowdy is evident
in Connecticut history as early as the Revolutionary War period. Records
compiled by the Daughters of the Revolution show the names of the men who
were veterans of the war. Five of those listed with the family name of
Gowdy were from Connecticut: Alexander Gowdy, Jr.—married Hannah MacGregory.
He was born 3 February, 1760 and died 2 September, 1838, Hill Gowdy—married
Roxanna MacGregory. He was born 13 February, 1763 and died 14 December,
1837. James Gowdy—married Deborah Luther. He was born 1753 and died 1842.
Samuel Gowdy, Sr.—married Abiah Pease. He was born 12 July, 1737 and died
17 November, 1811. Samuel Gowdy, Jr.—married Alice Gleason. He was born
10 May, 1760 and died 19 April, 1840. Another set of Connecticut records lists marriages performed. These are old church records which have been grouped together by city, county, or general rural district. In the Enfield area a marriage was performed which is of particular interest. It was between "Robert Gowdy & Content MacGregory (a triplet) Jan. 24, 1788". Does this record indicate that a triple marriage ceremony was performed? Did three Gowdy brothers marry three MacGregory sisters? Or is this just the image left behind in old records?

Whatever the relationship might have been between the various Gowdys and MacGregorys, they lived in an area which had a long history of commitment to liberty and independence. As early as 1639, with the development of the *Fundamental Orders*, the Hartford settlement established itself as one of self-sufficient, highly individualistic, and hardworking people. Other settlements joined them and eventually the company charter colony of Connecticut was established. The colonial governor, Jonathan Trumbull, sided with George Washington and his rebel forces in the difficult days of changing loyalties prior to the Revolutionary War. He was the only one to do so. From this stock came Hill Gowdy.
Hill Gowdy came to Savannah in 1841. He was listed as a passenger on the brig "Excel" out of New York. The New York-Savannah route was one regularly scheduled and frequently used by both Savannah and New York residents. Passenger lists for the arriving and departing ships were a staple item in Savannah newspapers of the time. According to those early papers, Gowdy arrived in Savannah for the first time in April, 1841. His arrival was followed in October by his business partner's arrival. Ashbel Welles travelled to Savannah by the brig "Excel" also.

The New York-Savannah connection was a natural one in 1841. The production of Upland and Sea Island cotton was the mainstay of Georgia's economy; the exporting of it was the mainstay of Savannah's. "A potent factor in maintaining a high price level was the commodity exchange in Savannah, through which the trading of the state was carried on."

Cotton: Cotton grown in Georgia was shipped out through the seaport of Savannah and into the greedy textile mills of New England by way of the seaport city of New York. It was a successful trade route which was increasing in importance every year. Hill Gowdy and Ashbel Welles took advantage of that connection to carry on their own business.

Between the years of October, 1841 and December, 1845 Gowdy & Welles acted as commission merchants. The commission merchant or factor was an important figure in the early commercial life of the country. A "factor is an agent employed to purchase or sell goods on commission in his own name, or in the name of his principal,..." Their names were often in the Savannah newspapers as consignees for incoming goods. One such shipment received by Gowdy & Welles was advertised in the Daily
Georgian as containing in part "71 bags Rio coffee, 76 B soap, 50 Goshen Cheese, 30 Casks qt. Porter, 15 Casks Teniriffa Wine, 20 B Tobacco, 14 Beef, Butter, Pimentos, Fish, Iron, Nails." Other similar shipments were advertised from time to time.

Business must have been good for Gowdy & Welles. Apparently, they kept a steady flow of goods coming into Savannah on consignment while Gowdy maintained an office and residence in New York. The New York City Directory listed Hill Gowdy for several years. In 1843 he boarded at the Clinton Hotel in New York and kept a business address at 40th Street, which was the dock area of the city. The 1845-46 City Directory gave his business address as 56 Front Street and residence as the American Hotel. Both hotels enjoyed a good reputation and may be considered a reflection of his growing success as a commission merchant. It is very likely that both Gowdy and Welles were in Savannah frequently, perhaps they travelled back and forth from one office to the other. Often notices were published in the Savannah newspapers that "Mr. Welles has a letter at the Post Office", or that he had arrived by ship and was "presently boarding at the Pulaski Hotel".

What kind of man was Hill Gowdy when he first came to Savannah? He was young, twenty-two, and probably full of self-confidence. Perhaps his Connecticut Yankee background gave him the spirit to trust in his own ability to succeed. Possibly he believed that hard work would be rewarded and was daring enough to leave the part of the country with which he was familiar for new places. There must have been a strong element of the gambler, maybe even the nonconformist in Gowdy. It was certainly the spirit of the times.

It may have been that very strength and independent nature which attracted Mary Ann Champion to Hill Gowdy. Whatever she saw in him was enough for her to marry him. A marriage license was issued to them on 17 December, 1845. Again the factual reality must give way to the imagination, because so few facts concerning her have been discovered. She remains less a reality and more an image than he. No further information was found.
on the marriage ceremony or her Family or any of the many tiny pieces that
come together to form a picture.

The next five of six years were spent by the Gowdys in New York at
their home on East 11th Street, first at number 23 and then at number 43.
Gowdy maintained his office at 56 Front Street during these New York years,
although his partnership with Welles had been dissolved in 1847 or 1848.
The New York City Directory 1847-48 listed Gowdy as a commission merchant
while the Bancroft's Business Census of Savannah 1848 listed Welles as a
grocer. Did they still do business of any sort with one another? Had
they parted friends?

If they did remain friends and communicated occasionally, Welles must
have known how the Gowdy family was growing. First was Mary, born in 1848.
Then came Marion, a son, in 1850 and Stella in 1853. It is very likely
that many of their friends in Savannah knew about the children and other
news since Gowdy was again making trips south to Savannah and receiving
goods on commission. According to a later newspaper item, Gowdy had
returned to Savannah in 1851. Since their third child, baby Stella, was
born in New York in 1853, it is safe to assume that Mary Ann stayed in
New York while Hill went south.

Savannah was once again a part of Gowdy's business life. In May, 1853
he received a shipment of goods from the "SS Alabama". He frequently
was listed in newspapers as a consignee for goods carried on the various
steamships which transported goods up and down the east coast, such as
the "Alabama" and the "Florida" and several others. It was also during
this time that his onetime partner Ashbel Welles died in New York.

It is possible that that event had some bearing on Gowdy's move away from
New York and back to Savannah. Mary Ann and the children may have influenced
his decision to concentrate all his attention on one location. Of course,
they may have simply preferred to live in Savannah.

Savannah of the 1850's was a beautiful city of 20,000. The cotton
trade was bringing wealth to the city and helping to create a growing merchant middleclass. New homes were being built and residential improvements were expected by the citizens.

Six things stand out with especial prominence in the history of the municipality during the years from 1850 to 1860. They are:

2. Introduction of gas as an illumination.
3. The building of a waterworks, supplying the city with water.
4. The developing railroads.
5. The introduction of a public school system.
6. The Yellow Fever epidemic of 1854.

The city council responded to the requests of Savannah residents to purchase a new public cemetery, since they felt that the old one in the center of town to be no longer adequate to serve the growing city. The council authorised the purchase of the Springfield plantation which lay outside the city to be used as a public cemetery. This would serve two purposes, they thought, because many believed the swampy land of the plantation to present a health hazard.

The Gowdys were one of the families to use the new cemetery, Laurel Grove.

In 1859 their sixth child was stillborn. Both George, who came in 1855, and Lillian who was born in 1857 had escaped the many dangers of the times and were healthy. The last child, the sixth, did not survive and was buried in the new cemetery. The section in which the infant was buried is now part of the oldest and the grave cannot be located.

The Gowdy family, Hill, Mary Ann, Mary, Marion, Stella, George, and Lillian lived in a large double house on the corner of Barnard and West Charlton. It is presently numbered 201 and 203, after the change was made in 1897 of the numbering system. At the time they occupied the house, it was numbered 165 and 167 Charlton Street. It was a large house, intended for two separate families, although no mention of who their neighbors were was found. Since the house was not owned by Gowdy, he most likely rented it from the owner. The house, still attractive and in apparent good shape,
faced onto Pulaski Square. It had three floors above ground and one below the street level. In the 1860 Census three women were listed as living in the house as servants. Sarah Macready, Bridget Murphy, and Alice Neiler must have helped in carrying out the tremendous burdens of work which a large family in an equally large home created in that day. The addition of any labor-saving devices or conveniences would have been welcomed by those who did the work.

If Bridget, Alice, and Sarah were working for the Gowdys when the city installed water mains and gas lights in their section of town, they probably were glad to see the improvements, if only because it lightened their work load. The city council bought gas lamps and posts and "decided to allow a post and lantern free to every owner of a house provided he lighted the same at his own expense". This arrangement continued and was apparently satisfactory until the outbreak of the Civil War. After that, service and supply deteriorated and were not improved until 1870. Along with lighted streets, city dwellers would also boast of running water in their houses. Of course, it was often unfit to drink but the creation of reservoirs and filters improved its quality. Life was improving for the Gowdys of Pulaski Square. They lived in a pleasant, fine house with servants to help with the work and raising of the children. The general quality of life seems to have been good.

The railroad may have been important to Savannah in later years, or to another family in the city during that decade, but there is no evidence available that it had any significant effect on Hill Gowdy or his family. They were also able to avoid losing any immediate members of the family to the epidemic of 1854. The last item of the six which were considered to be of prominence in the 1850-1860 decade, introduction of a public school system, may have touched their lives. In the 1860 Census there was an indication that of the five Gowdy children three were of school age and had attended school in the past year. It is not to be automatically assumed that they
attended the new public school, rather that they were of an age where they might have. Another assumption which might be safe to make is that those same young Gowdys were as fascinated with the firehouse and engine which were located on their square as any children today would be. From as early as 1846 a firehouse with an engine was maintained on Pulaski Square. By 1857 Engine No.2 consisted of "an engine with hose carriage, 450 feet of hose, manned by two white officers and 79 slaves". The firehouse bell was removed from the company in 1860 and eventually the entire firehouse was removed by 1870. George and Stella and Marion must have loved that bell and firehouse. The removal of the bell from Pulaski Square serves as a symbol of the end of the golden years for both the Gowdys and the city of Savannah.
Pruning
1861-1884

The war which had threatened for years became a reality in 1861. That unspeakable horror for which man alone is responsible, spread across the land like a scorching fire. It moved with its heat of death and waste into Georgia, ripping apart the very fabric of lives. Normal day to day problems were enlarged with the loss of means of communication, ports blockaded, railroads torn up, and commerce brought to a standstill. Farms and plantations sat as isolated from the market as ships adrift at sea. Cities withered as did the crops in the untended fields. Savannah, cut off from the rest of the state by disrupted rail service and from the sea by blockade, also started to wither.

Hardest hit were those whose livelihood depended on the movement of goods and trade. Hill Gowdy must have lived through those lean years on what had been initially good investments and which he probably expected to see him through his later years with comfort and security. He must have taken his responsibility to his family seriously, because beginning in 1856 he created a trust for his wife and children. He bought several pieces of property to be held in trust for them. Not only did he attempt to choose sound investments for them, he also chose a highly respected and successful man to act as the trustee, Aaron Champinn. Gowdy's life in Savannah seems to have been closely associated with Champion's life. Not only did he remain the trustee for almost thirty years, but he often acted on behalf of the family. It was from Champion that Gowdy obtained the lot on Pulaski Square where he built the small brick house in 1864. It was to Champion that Gowdy turned when he was dissolving his early partnership with Welles and Champion who bought several slaves from Gowdy in 1859. Champion sold several lots on behalf of the trust in order to re-invest the money for Mary Ann and the children. Gradually, Gowdy sold off lot by lot until he finally sold the wharf on the riverfront.
The riverfront lot, which was called Anderson's Wharf, was of the greatest importance to Gowdy. He must have been faced with total financial collapse in order to sell the wharf and storage area. The thing which set a commission merchant apart from a broker was that he "is entrusted with the possession, management, control, and disposal of the goods to be bought or sold". To lose the wharf meant a loss of his entire business.

He did manage to hold onto the property on Pulaski Square and to build a small brick house there in 1864. Although there are no indications that he ever lived in it, he continued to make improvements to the property. In 1868 he sold the house and lot to H. Roberts, but that was after the war had ended. What had gone on in those four years and how much remains to be seen?

In earlier years, 1858, 1859, and 1860 Gowdy was listed in the city business directories as having an office on Bay Street. In the 1860 listing specifically, a clerk by the name of E.J. Gowdy worked in the business with Hill and boarded at his house on Pulaski Square. He might have been another one of those Connecticut Gowdys who preferred the south. He, Edmond Gowdy, later took part in the war as a member of the Chatham Artillery. He survived and returned to Savannah. Life continued for the family. Mary Ann and the eldest daughter Mary were confirmed by the Bishop on Easter of 1862 and became communicants at St. John's Episcopal Church. It was a convenient place for them to attend church, just two blocks down Charlton from their home. It must not have been convenient enough for Hill though, since he was never a communicant there. Again the image of the individualistic, maybe even puritanical, Yankee comes through. In all fairness, it must be noted that while there is absolutely no indication that he took up arms for The Cause, he did once donate money to a Soliders Aid Society sponsored by St. John's.

Maybe Mary Ann made him do it.

Finally the war ended. Sherman came to town and "gave it to the President as a Christmas present". He also found and "gave away" 35,000 Bales of cotton which had been stored in warehouses, waiting to be slipped past the blockade.
if possible and on to England. One such blockade runner " came into Savannah after we (Sherman's army) were in full possession, and the master did not discover his mistake till he came ashore to visit the custom-house", according to General Sherman's account. Once the war ended the blockade was lifted and Gowdy had a chance, along with all the rest of Savannah's businessmen, to recoup his losses. And perhaps he could have, had not the final blow been struck. In 1868 he suffered the loss of his warehouse and its contents in a fire. There was no insurance. During the next two years, he was involved in several court suits for indebtedness, until finally what little there was left was sold at public auction. It was over for Hill Gowdy in Savannah.

He returned to New York and attempted to re-establish his life. In 1871, at age 52, he started over. There is no way to know how the failure in Georgia effected him personally, but it did not destroy him. His business continued to be listed in the Brooklyn City Directory, first as a broker in 1871-72 and then as a merchant in 1875. In 1876-77, there was no trade or business listed, only his home address.

A tiny four line item appeared in the Savannah paper on 28 July, 1884. It was back on the fourth page at the bottom, simply stating that it had been learned that Mr. Hill Gowdy had died at his home in Brooklyn, New York. There was nothing in the New York Times. He died on 20 July, 1884 and left no will. Mary Ann applied to the court to be named administrator and it was approved 19 January, 1885. He left property worth one hundred dollars.

The life of Hill Gowdy belongs to the past. We are left with only the traces of that life and what we can make of them. I have come to see him as a reflection of a certain time in the history of the United States, the economic growth and commercial development of a nation. Through the facts I have invested him with certain traits and characteristics which I believe to have been true of him and his times.
End Notes


2. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


8. Daily Georgian(Savannah), April 29, 1841, 2/7.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


12. Index to Newspapers of Savannah, 1841-1845, "Gowdy & Welles", sometimes spelled "Wells".


14. Daily Georgian(Savannah), December 3, 1845, 1/4, December 17, 1845, 1/3.

15. Interview with Franklin Garratt, Atlanta Historical Society, February 7, 1980. All references to the New York city directories from the period between 1843-1853 are from Mr. Garratt's information taken from his private collection of directories. It is also Mr. Garratt's opinion that the addresses revealed a certain standard of living.


18. Chatham County Marriages 1805-1852, Index, also entry number 2806 Chatham County Probate Court Records, Marriage Book.

19. Interview F. Garratt.


21. Interview F. Garratt.

22. George Bancroft, Bancroft's Business Census of Savannah 1848, p.68.

24. Daily Morning News (Savannah), November 20, 1855, 2/5. Newspaper Digest 1855, n.89.


27. Newspaper Digest 1855, p.89.


30. Gamble, pp.204-205.

31. Cemetery Records, Savannah, Laurel Grove Index, 1850-1938. Compiled by WPA.


33. Interview with Groundskeeper Laurel Grove Cemetery. I also consulted the map at the cemetery office, searched for the grave on foot, but only a methodical system of comparison of actual grave sites with the records will locate the "lost" section. It may be profitable.


35. Savannah City Directory 1896, 1897. Since the numbering system for the dwellings was changed in 1897 it was necessary to compare one name for both years.

36. Schreck Index to Wards, Book 11 Pulaski Ward, Chatham County Court House.


39. Gamble, pp204-238.


41. Gamble, p.197.

42. Gamble, pp. 238, 278.


44. Aaron Champion MS, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah.

45. Pulaski Ward Book, lot 25, 111 W. Charlton, GHS.

46. Deed Book 35, p.308.

47. Deed Book 3W, p.520.

50. Ibid.
51. Savannah City Directory 1860, p.172
52. Daily News Herald (Savannah), August 19, 1868, 3/2, Newspaper Digest p.367.
53. St. John's Episcopal Church Record Book 2, 1853-1875, p.93.
54. Daily Morning News (Savannah), November 21, 1861, 2/5.
57. Daily News Herald (Savannah), May 4, 1868, 3/3.
58. Chatham County Superior Court, Proceedings Judgement Book Index, 1869-1911.
60. Brooklyn City Directories 1871-72, 1875, 1876-77. This information was sent to me by letter from the librarian at the New City Genealogical and Biographical Society.
62. Interview with Vinnie O'Connell, law student at St. John's Law School, New York City. Mr. O'Connell has aided me in searching the Brooklyn records.
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Other Sources

Interview: Mrs. A. Champion McAlpin, wife of a decendant of Aaron Champion. She lives in Savannah, Georgia.

Interview: Franklin Garratt, associated with Atlanta Historical Society. Mr. Garratt was very responsive to my problem of locating old New York and Brooklyn City Directories.

Interview: Vinnie O’Connell, law student at St. John’s Law School, New York.

Letter: Mrs. Burchell Rowe, Venice, Florida. She is married to a Champion decendant.