THE MAN WHO BUILT A HOUSE

A BIOGRAPHY OF ALEXANDER TELFAIR

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History 300

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DEDICATION

This biography of Alexander Telfair is dedicated to that individual who hopefully will receive the inspiration, achieve the motivation, and maintain the stamina to write the legacy of the Telfair family. This would begin with Governor Telfair who made a fortune, his children who maintained it, and further generations who went all the way to the Supreme Court to unsuccessfully try to keep it from the benefit of posterity.
ABSTRACT

ALEXANDER TELFAIR
(1789-1832)

How often it occurs that the great work a man sets out originally to accomplish, is lost sight of, by future generations, in contemplation of other achievements of that man, which he himself regarded as of second importance.

Julian Street

This is certainly true of Alexander Telfair. He was born to the Governor of Georgia and the daughter of a wealthy Savannah planter. Shortly after graduating from Princeton, Telfair's father died. This left him with the responsibility of managing his father's vast estate. His older brothers died leaving him as the only man in the family of a mother and sisters.

Telfair preserved the family, the family wealth, and took his place as a religious and civic leader. He is mainly remembered for the house he had constructed which is now a museum.
CHAPTER 1

A NOBLE HERITAGE

Great excitement had been created on May 10, 1775, when the news of the Battle of Lexington reached Savannah.\(^1\) The next evening, Sarah Gibbons Telfair, the wife of Edward Telfair anxiously awaited the return of her husband; her brother, William Gibbons;\(^2\) her nephew, Noble W. Jones; and three other men who broke into the powder magazine of the British forces in Savannah.\(^3\) They removed around six hundred pounds of powder to be used against the British.\(^4\) Some of this powder was stored for local use, some sent to South Carolina, and the rest was forwarded to Boston where it was used in the Battle of Bunker Hill.\(^5\)

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\(^2\)Gibbons-Telfair Geneology, Geneology File, Georgia Historical Socitey, Savannah, Ga. (No compiler or date).


\(^4\)Charles C. Jones, Jr., *Biographical Sketch of the Delegates from Georgia to the Continental Congress*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflie & Co., 1891) 42.

Sarah's fears ended when the men returned safely. The British offered a reward of one hundred and fifty pounds to anyone with information concerning the stolen gunpowder. Everyone knew who the offenders were, but none offered them any information.\(^6\)

Edward Telfair, who was born in Scotland in 1735, came to the United States at the age of twenty-three. He lived in Virginia and North Carolina for a short time.\(^7\) He probably came to Georgia because his brother, William, was established as a merchant by 1766. The two brothers "set out to acquire fortune and fame by industrious attention to their commercial interest, the acquisition of land grants, political affiliations, and advantageous marriages."\(^8\)

Both men married women from wealthy families. With the onslaught of the Revolutionary War, the brothers chose opposite sides. "A persistent tradition in Savannah has it that it was done by agreement between these brothers in order that which ever side won, the family would be in grace and interest of the losing side would be taken care of.\(^9\)

Edward Telfair became very successful in forming several business partnerships. He owned the principal

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\(^8\)M. H. & D. B. Floyd, Collection of Papers and Notes, Collection, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah.

\(^9\)Ibid.
commercial houses in Georgia dealing largely in European and East Indian goods. With his vast land holdings, the selling of slaves, and engaging in ship building; he amassed a fortune.  

Edward was appointed to the Provincial Council of Safety which could later function as a provisional state government. He lost some of his wealth during the Revolutionary War, but quickly regained and added it to his former possessions.

By 1777, Edward Telfair was a large property holder in Burke County, owning such places as Telfair's Mill, Telfair's Woods, and Telfairsville. In 1778 he was elected to the House of Assembly of Georgia, a delegation to represent Georgia in the Continental Congress. He also signed the ratification of the Articles of Confederation. For a one-year term of office, he served as Governor of Georgia from January 9, 1786, to January 9, 1787. Under the new constitution of 1790, he again served as Governor from November 9,  

1790, to November 7, 1793.\textsuperscript{14}

Into this background of wealth, power, and prestige, Alexander Telfair, was born on January 25, 1789.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15}Family Records, Telfair Family Collection, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
CHAPTER 2

EARLY YEARS

In May of 1791, when Alex, as he was often called, was a little over two years old, the people of the state were excited with the visit of George Washington. After leaving Savannah the President visited Augusta which was the capital of Georgia at this time.\(^1\)

On the first day President Washington had dinner at Governor Telfair's residence. Mrs. Telfair gave a ball for the ladies that evening which the President attended. On the next day, the President had dinner with the Telfairs again.\(^2\)

At this time Alex was too young to know how much he would later admire this guest.\(^3\) Alex would probably have been more impressed with "Cornwallis," George Washington's favorite dog, than he was with the President himself. This dog died and was buried in Augusta.\(^4\)

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\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)Alexander Telfair, Telfair Family Papers, Address delivered on February 22, 1832, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

Edward Telfair sent his children to his friend, William Few, to oversee their Northern education. Alex attended the Bergen Academy in New Jersey before attending Princeton. At one time Alex and his two brothers, Josiah and Thomas, attended Princeton at the same time.

In February of 1803 Alex received a letter from his father asking for an account of five hundred dollars which he had sent. In return, Alex answered that he had not received the money but believed that Mr. Howard at Princeton had credited the money to one of his brother's account. He stated that he curtailed his expenses as much as possible. He did not want to appear extravagant or "niggardly," but to keep a "mediocrity."

In March of 1807, Edward Telfair sent Alex two hundred fifty dollars for his last payment at Princeton. He mentioned that he was sure that Alex would want to spend


6V. Lansing Collins, Letter to T. P. Ravenel, Savannah, Ga. requesting general biographical information on the Telfair boys dated May 24, 1917, Princeton University's Seeley C. Mudd Manuscript Library. (Mr. Ravenel was the attorney for alberta Telfair Gould. It was she and her brother who contested the will of Mary Telfair who equeathed means to establish The Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences.)

a few weeks in Savannah after graduation before "departing in quest of a profession."

Josiah graduated from Princeton in 1803, Thomas in 1805, and Alex in 1807. After graduation Josiah studied law in Savannah and Thomas studied law in Litchfield, Connecticut.

Alex was aware of his father's great wealth from an early age, but his mother's wealth was not to be overlooked. Sarah Telfair's wealth was slower in being bestowed to her. When her mother died in 1790, Mrs. Telfair's inheritance from the estate consisted of a large loom quilt and a tea tray. The Telfair children received two slaves, David and York, and three breeding sheep.

Mrs. Telfair had a brother in Liberty County, Joseph Gibbons who was an attorney. At his death in 1794, he left Sarah Telfair a Negro man named Winter, his wife and son,

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9V. Lansing Collins, Letter to T. P. Ravenel, Savannah, Ga., from Princeton University, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton N.J.


Sarah Gibbons, Chatham Co. Will, Record Book D, Folio No. 148, 1788-1791, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.
plus a tray. Alex's two sisters, Mary and Sarah, each received seventy pounds.\footnote{12}

It was not until the death of Mrs. Telfair's brother, William Gibbons, in 1815, that Alex shared in the wealth from his mother's side. William Gibbons left to his sister and her children when they reached the age of twenty-one, 995 acres in Burke County, property in the city of Savannah, the island of Cockspur, and Sabine Fields Plantation in Chatham County.\footnote{13}

Another of Alex's relatives which helped add to the finances of the Telfairs was his uncle, Barack Gibbons. He left property in Savannah to be divided between his nieces and nephews.\footnote{14} Barack Gibbons was a planter who died of dysentery at the house of Dr. Samuel Kollock on Broughton Street. He was attended by Alex's brother, Josiah, who had the corpse entombed in the family vault at Sharon Plantation near Savannah.\footnote{15}

\footnote{12}Joseph Gibbons, Chatham Co. Will, Record Book E, Folio No. 184, 1791-1801, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

\footnote{13}William Gibbons, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2P, 1828-1830, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

\footnote{14}William & Barrack Gibbons, Chatham Co., Deed Book 2F, 1814-1816, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

After the death of these two brothers, William and Barack Gibbons, Sarah Telfair inherited one seventh of the remains of her father's vast estate. 16

CHAPTER 3
LIFE WITHOUT THE GOVERNOR

On September 17, 1807, after a sickness of two days, Governor Edward Telfair died at his townhouse in Savannah while his family was away. After church services and military honors were performed, he was buried in the family vault¹ at Sharon Plantation.²

Governor Telfair's estate was equally divided among his wife, three sons, and three daughters.³ In January of 1808 one of a division of Negroes from the Telfair estate was divided into seven lots for Mrs. Telfair and each of her six living children. Each lot of slaves was written on seven separate pieces of paper. Alex drew lot number two


²Telfair Family Scrapbook, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga. (Paper and Date not shown on clippings) Mary Telfair, last surviving child of Governor Telfair, built a monument in honor of her father at Bonaventure Cemetery. She supposedly had his remains moved there around 1850 after having a dispute with her brother, Thomas Telfair's descendents. Years later grave robbers desecrated the vault at Sharon Plantation. In the process of moving the bodies to Bonaventure, it was discovered that Edward Telfair's body was still at Sharon. The identity of the individual originally moved to Bonaventure is unknown.

³Edward Telfair, Chatham Co. Will, Folio No. 46, Chatham County court House, Savannah, Ga.
which consisted on only one slave, Diana, who was valued at four hundred dollars. His brother, Thomas, drew lot number four which consisted of six less desirable slaves. One was valued at two hundred dollars, one at thirty dollars, and four at five dollars each. The value of the slaves were undervalued or else Alex was generous to his mother when he paid her one thousand dollars for her lot of five slaves in 1814.

Sarah Telfair had given birth to ten children, but at the time of Edward Telfair's death; Alex only had two brothers and three sisters remaining.

Josiah was the oldest being born on June 24, 1784. He was not very active in Savannah life and probably lived in another city. In 1815 Alex bought a house from Josiah which had been part of the William Gibbons estate.

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4Edward Telfair, Estate, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2D, 1810-1812, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

5Sarah G. Telfair, Telfair Family Papers, Folio No. 790, Bill of Sales, June 29, 1814, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

6Telfair Family Records, Telfair Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

7Ibid.

8M. H. & D. B. Floyd, Collection of Papers and Notes, Collection No. 1308, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah.

9Josiah G. Telfair, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2F, 1814-1816, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.
died on March 13, 1817, at the age of thirty-three.\(^{10}\)

Thomas was next in line being born on March 2, 1786. Thomas took care of much of the family business after the death of their father.\(^{11}\) Thomas who was a Lieutenant in the Georgia Foresters delivered the second Fourth of July Oration at the Presbyterian Church in 1808.\(^{12}\) Thomas paid his brothers and sisters $3,500 for their share of the six hundred acre Beach Forest Plantation which had been part of William Gibbons' estate.\(^{13}\) After supporting James Madison for President, he was nominated by the Democratic Republicans in September of 1808 to represent Chatham County in the state legislature.\(^{14}\) The next month he was elected to that office.\(^{15}\)

Thomas was married on March 16, 1809.\(^{16}\) His bride was

\(^{10}\)Telfair Family Records, Telfair Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

\(^{11}\)Edward Telfair, Estate Records with Will, Folio No. 46, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

\(^{12}\)The Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, July 5, 1808, Vol. VI, p. 2, c. 3.

\(^{13}\)William Gibbons, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2P, 1828-1830, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

\(^{14}\)The Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, September 24, 1808, Vol. VI, p. 3, c. 2.

\(^{15}\)Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, October 5, 1809, Vol. XIV, p. 3, c. 3.

\(^{16}\)Telfair Family Records, Telfair Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
Miss Margaret Long of Wilkes County. She was educated at the Moravian School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Margaret's father, Colonel Long, built a house for his daughter in Wilkes County. Thomas served as a member of Congress from March 4, 1813, to March 3, 1817. In his last term in office the members of Congress voted themselves a raise. This outraged the people of Georgia so much that they recalled all of their members to Congress and told them to stay at home after that. Thomas then took his wife to live in Savannah. 17

Their first child Edward, died at nine months of age in November, 1813. Mary was born in 1813. Margaret was born in 1816. Thomas Telfair died on February 18, 1818. Another daughter was born after his death, but died shortly afterwards. 18

Alexander was born next followed by his sister Mary, on January 28, 1791. 19 Mary never married and lived with Alex as long as he lived.


18 Telfair Family Records, Telfair Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga. Of Governor Telfair's ten children, six reached adulthood. Of these six children, Thomas was the only one to have children to grow up. Of his two daughters only Mary had children- a son and a daughter.

19 Ibid.
Sarah was born on September 28, 1792. She married George Haig on April 26, 1815. A son was born dead on May 20, 1816. George Gaige died December 4, 1816. George, their son, was born May 10, 1817. He died November 25, 1817.  

Alex's last sister, Margaret, was born March 28, 1797. She remained single while Alex was living.  

Evidently it took the Telfair boys time to learn to manage the vast empire of the Governor. In 1808 the Telfairs were listed in the paper in a "List of Defaulters of Tax Returns." Taxes would be doubled if not paid before December the first.  

Along with learning his father's business and sharing in the responsibility of a family of several females, Alex began to fulfill his destiny of becoming a civic leader. At the age of twenty, one of Alex's first speaking engagements was the result of an invitation by the Republicans to give Independence Address at the Presbyterian Church on July 4, 1809.  

Alexander Telfair volunteered for the military when his country was in peril because of the War of 1812.  

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20 Telfair Family Records, Telfair Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.  

21 Ibid.  

22 The Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger, November 5, 1808, Vol. VI, p. 4, c. 2.  


He remained active for several years to follow because he was fined twenty dollars for missing an Officer's Drill on May 8, 1828, and also twenty dollars for missing the Regimental Parade the following day.\textsuperscript{25}

Perhaps Alex was able to receive inspiration if not guidance from another one of his uncles, Thomas Gibbons, who was one of Savannah's first big entrepreneurs besides Governor Telfair. Thomas Gibbons was born in 1757 and was a Loyalist during the Revolutionary War. He was able to hold his property afterwards because his father and brother were Patriots. He became a lawyer and the people of Savannah forgave him for his loyalty to Britain because they elected him mayor twice. He later became a federal judge. In 1810 he got into the steamboat ferry business and broke in on the steamboat operation monopoly on the Hudson River. Gibbons was sued, but retained Daniel Webster as his attorney and won in a Supreme Court decision. By 1820 Gibbons had moved to New York. He left his son, William, in charge. William said that his father had taught him to "live as each day were the last; but in building, build as if I was to live forever."\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25}Savannah Georgian, June 7, 1828, c. 1, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{26}Joseph Frederick Waring, Cerveau's Savannah (Savannah, GA.: The Georgia Historical Society, 1973) 19-20.
CHAPTER 4
A HOUSE IN SAVANNAH

By 1818 Savannah spread from East Broad Street to just beyond West Broad Street. On the North it started at the Savannah River and ended at Liberty Street on the South.¹ Alex's uncle, William Gibbons had obtained a lot together with John Habersham. This Lot "N", Heathcote Ward was a sixty foot lot facing St. James Square where the residence of the royal Governor of Georgia stood during Colonial and Revolutionary periods. It was here that Governor Wright was arrested by the Patriots on January 18, 1776.² Alex's father was most likely one of those brave men that caused the Governor's Council to flee through doors and windows not realizing that the Patriots did not have a force to back them up.³

William Gibbons had left his half of the lot to Alex's mother, Sarah Telfair, and her children. In July 1810,


²Telfair Family Mansion, Georgia Historical Commission Plaque, in front of the Telfair Academy of Arts & Sciences.

³M. H. & D. B. Floyd, Collection of Papers and Notes Collection, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
Alexander Telfair bought from the estate of John Habersham the other half of the lot for $5,028.18.\textsuperscript{4} It was not until 1818 that Alexander bought the interest of his mother\textsuperscript{5} and other family members for the remaining portions of the other half of the lot for six thousand dollars.\textsuperscript{6}

One of Alex's business associates, Richard Richardson, had obtained Richardson's wife's brother-in-law, William Jay, from England to design a house for him. Alexander employed this same architect to build a house for him on his lot on prestigious St. James' Square.\textsuperscript{7}

Alex demolished the old wooden government house originally built in 1755 to make room for his "handsome Greek-revival brick and stucco mansion."\textsuperscript{8}

Construction was going strong in 1819 when Alex paid for fifty tons of building stone, 31,000 bricks, plus other brick and stone. Some of the bricks were shipped in from Charleston.\textsuperscript{9}


\textsuperscript{5}Sarah G. Telfair, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2H, 1817-1818, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

\textsuperscript{6}Heathcote Ward, Ward Book, unpublished, Georgia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{7}Hanna H. Lerski, Itinerant English Architect 1792-1837 (New York: University Press of America, 1983)

\textsuperscript{8}M. H. & D. B. Floyd, Collection of Papers and Notes, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

\textsuperscript{9}Hanna H. Lerski, Itinerant English Architect 1792-1837 (New York: University Press of America, 1983) 120
The two story building with a basement had a small porch in front with unfluted Corinthian columns. There were steps leading up the side of the porch and a long door-window with iron grillwork on each side of the porch.\textsuperscript{10}

To the left of the entrance was located an octagonal library. The uniqueness of this room besides its eight walls was that they were painted to simulate oak paneling.\textsuperscript{11}

The dining room was located behind the library. This was a large bay room. On the other side of the hall was a double parlor with a sliding door to join or divide the rooms. The Western parlor ended in a large bay to match the dining room. The kitchen was located under the dining room. The central part contained a wooden staircase which was lighted by a lantern set in the roof. The six bedrooms were located on the second floor. The house had a white marble mantelpiece with Ionic columns. The house aptly reflected Alexander's personality -"refined, but not showy."\textsuperscript{12}


Behind the house was a beautiful garden and a carriage house with accommodations for some of the servants upstairs.\textsuperscript{13}

Savannah was dry after having no rain for months. Alexander Telfair's house had not long been finished when on the morning of January 11, 1820, a fire broke out in Savannah between 1:00 and 2:00 A.M. It lasted for about twelve hours. Between four and five hundred structures were consumed by fire. Only one wholesale and one retail store remained in the business district. Alex's house was spared.\textsuperscript{14}

It was believed that bandits set fire in order to loot the city in the confusion.\textsuperscript{15} Many people only escaped with their night clothes. Alex was active in the relief activities after this fire which was the most disastrous fire in the United States up to that time.\textsuperscript{16}

Between April and September another disaster occurred with the arrival of a ship from the West Indies with the disease, yellow fever, on board. With a population of 7,523, nearly six thousand left the city. In five months

\textsuperscript{13}M.H. & D. B. Floyd, Collection of Papers and Notes, Collection No. 1308, Folder 619, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

\textsuperscript{14}John E. Maguire, \textit{Historical Souvenir - Savannah Fire Department} (Savannah: The Firemen's Relief Fund Association, 1906) 14.


695 deaths from yellow fever were reported. At about this same period of time some of Alex's friends and associates suffered with financial ruin with the bank panic. Alexander escaped all of this virtually unharmed. And out of this period he obtained a house which unknowing to him was his link to each of ys today.

17 Elfrida DeRenne Barrow & Laura Palmer Bell, Anchored Yesterdays, (Savannah, Ga.: Review Publishing & Printing Co, 1923) 19.


19 His home is now the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences on Telfair Square in Savannah, Ga.
CHAPTER 5
BUSINESS VENTURES

Among Alexander's own personal property, he managed his father's vast estate for the rest of the family. This included thousands of acres in Glynn, Bryan, Baldwin, and Chatham Counties.¹ This is in addition to the property in Burke county.²

Much of Governor Telfair's property only changed hands among the family members. Two exceptions to this was property which was sold to the United States government. In March of 1811, a 75 foot by 275 foot lot in Trustees Gardens was sold.³ In February of 1830 The United States Government bought the Island of Cockspur for five thousand dollars. Alex's portion of this sale was $833.33.⁴

¹Tax Digest, Chatham Co., 1831, Reel No. 334, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
²Telfair Family Collection, Collection No. 792, Folder No. 1, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
³Alexander Telfair, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2D, 1810-1812, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.
⁴Alexander Telfair, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2Q, 1830-1832, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga.

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For most of the last ten years of his life, Alex was elected as a director of the Bank of the United States.\textsuperscript{5}

In 1810 Thomas Telfair and other members of a citizen's committee recommended that the City of Savannah build a theater.\textsuperscript{6} Apparently Alex thought this was a good idea because he was soon investing in the project as a stockholder and was a temporary chairman of the board of trustees until he was elected in March of 1819 to serve in that capacity for life.\textsuperscript{7}

The construction of the Savannah Theatre began in February of 1818 and opened in December of 1818. The final cost was eleven thousand dollars. William Jay held the mortgage which drew interest in the amount of $3,960. On April 29, 1820, William Jay's mortgage was transferred to Richard Richardson for $13,700. Richardson was to be paid the interest on the mortgage but there was no money and the stockholders voted for foreclosure. On May 6, 1823, the theatre was sold for $5,100.\textsuperscript{8}


\textsuperscript{7}Colonial Museum & Savannah Daily Gazette, February 22, 1819, p. 3, c. 1.

Just as the citizens of Savannah had wanted a theatre for cultural advantages, the merchants of Savannah realized the benefits of having access to the Savannah River from the interior of the state by waterway. The Altamaha River branched off to go to Milledgeville on the Oconee and Macon on the Ocmulgee.⁹ Alex was elected as director of the Savannah, Ogeechee, and Altamaha Canal Company.¹⁰

On October 21, 1826, the city council consented to cutting the canal through the city land. The city eventually subscribed to ten thousand dollars of the company stock.¹¹ After completion it was used by poleboats, rafts, and flatboats to carry cotton, lumber, and rice. Horses drew canal boats along the river for excursions.¹²

In 1828 a group of friends and fellow citizens called upon Alexander Telfair to offer himself for election to

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¹⁰Savannah Georgian, April 8, 1828, Vo. X, p. 2, c. 1.


the next legislature. Alex decided not to try to follow in the footsteps of his older brother and father. The next day he ran a notice in the paper stating that he was not a candidate for a seat in the next legislature.

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CHAPTER 6

PLANTATIONS

Alexander Telfair had the responsibility of maintaining several plantations. One of his plantations was in Burke County. His overseer was Henry Utly. In 1820 he had seventy eight slaves on this plantation.¹ In 1830 the overseer at Mills Plantation was David Robinson. On June 30, 1830, he wrote Alex telling him that there had been no rain in five weeks. He indicated that the mill was working during this time.²

On December 10, 1830, H. Lovett of his Scriven County plantation, Mobley's Pond wrote Alex of a wind and rain storm. Lovett was complaining that the Negroes were allowed their own hogs when he came as the overseer. He told Alex that the neighbors were complaining and that the slaves' hogs were getting mixed up with Alex's hogs. He also requested one more mule. There were eleven, but he needed one for each thirty acres. This gave them 360


²Alexander Telfair Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
acres of cultivated land at this plantation. On March 11, 1832, Hambleton Lovett stated that there were seventy acres of corn planted.³

Alex's plantation in Jefferson County near Louisville, the capitol of Georgia before it was moved to Milledgeville, was called Retreat. On June 2, 1826, Alex's overseer, Elisha Cain, wrote him a letter telling Alex of the dry weather. He had sold $203.00 worth of corn, but was waiting to see how the present corn crop was going before selling any more corn. He stated that the "Negroes have been obedient and have worked well." He ended by stating that he had done the best that he could, but at least it was better than the year before.⁴

On November 12, 1828, Cain wrote Telfair that they now had one hundred twenty bales of cotton picked. The corn crop was the best yet. The cotton would have been better if it had rained. He then closed the letter saying that he would be quitting at the end of the year. Cain was going to retire with his brother to their own land.⁵

Another letter quickly followed on December 5th. informing Alex that he had decided to stay. On July 22,

³Alexander Telfair Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.
1829, Cain wrote Alex a letter addressed in care of Curtis Bolton in New York. This letter was forwarded to Alex at Saratoga Springs. Cain told of hail and rain.\textsuperscript{6}

Alex Telfair bought 850 acres in Barnwell District, South Carolina for $5,600 from family members. He also bought other land surrounding this tract. This was called Thorn Island Plantation.\textsuperscript{7}

Alex distributed to his overseers instructions such as his "Rules and Directions to be strictly attended to by all overseers at Thorn Island Plantation."\textsuperscript{8} Some of these rules were:

The allowance for every grown Negro, let him or her be old and good for nothing, and every young one that works in the field, is a peck of corn a week and a pint of salt, and a piece of meat not exceeding fourteen pounds per month.

No Negro to have more than forty lashes, no matter what his crime.

The suckling children and all small ones who so not work in the field draw a half allowance of corn and salt.

Any Negro can have a ticket to go about the neighborhood, but cannot leave it without a pass. No stranger allowed to come on the place without a pass.

The Negroes to be tasked when the work allows it. I require a reasonable day's work well done.

\textsuperscript{6}Alexander Telfair Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid.
The task to be regulated by the state of the ground and the strength of the Negro.

All visiting between the Georgia plantation to be refused. No one to get husbands or wives across the river. No night meetings or preaching allowed on the place except on Saturday or Sunday morning.

If there is any fighting on the place, whip all engaged in it, no matter what may be the cause it may be covered with.

In extreme cases of sickness employ a physician. After a dose of castor oil is given, a dose of calomel, and blister applied, if no relief, then send.

My Negroes are not allowed to plant cotton for themselves. Everything else they may plant. Give them tickets to sell what they make.

I have no Driver. You are to task the Negroes yourself. They are responsible to you alone for work.

Bales of cotton to weigh 300 lbs.
Billy to do blacksmith work.
Make manure of everything you can.
Plant turnin patch each year.
All draw shoes except children and those nursing them.
Write each month.
Give Negroes nails when building or repairing their homes.

Alexander Telfair

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9Alexander Telfair Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.
Alex's Chatham County plantation was Sabine Fields which contained 495 acres consisting of eleven 45-acre farm lots. This was probably the smallest of his four main plantations since it had only about thirty field hands.\(^{10}\)

Alex was away from Savannah often, and when he was at home, he did not constantly visit his plantations. In his absence from Savannah he relied on Robert Habersham to attend to any matter that was pressing. Alex kept in close contact with him and knew what was going on.\(^{11}\)

Habersham reported unfavorably to Alex about Alex's overseer at Bertrand in Effingham County. He had asked Habersham for liquor and money, but had been refused. Alex approved of this and stated that all of his overseers had been very regular in communicating with Alex except this one. Alex was in Bristol, Pennsylvania, at the time, but he made arrangements for Habersham to see that this overseer got a letter which Alex was writing to him.\(^{12}\)

Alex knew one year that his corn in Burke County might

\(^{10}\)Alexander Telfair, Chatham Co. Deed Book 2H, 1817-1818, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Ga. Alexander Telfair, Inventory and Records of Estate, Chatham County Will, File No. 84, 1833.


\(^{12}\)Ibid.
be a little short. He instructed Habersham to give his overseers up to fifty dollars if the overseer requested it.\textsuperscript{13} He gave instructions for one of his overseers to lay his crop, cut wood, and save an abundant supply of hay.\textsuperscript{14}

At times Alex would have some slaves brought in to do work in Savannah which was needed, such as repairing the wharf.\textsuperscript{15}

Even while Alex was up North, not only did he keep in touch with his business affairs at home, he was learning and observing what he could to help his own holdings prosper. In a letter to Habersham he stated that it was calculated that up North the cotton market will be high in the fall. He felt that a bumper crop would not keep up with the increasing demand. Much of the land in Georgia and the Carolinas had been cultivated in grain which had been in cotton the season before. Alex was also proud that Georgia had not decreased its output even though during the last seven years there had been a decrease in the population due to the settlement of Alabama.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13}Robert Habersham Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga. Alexander Telfair Letters to R. Habersham.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
CHAPTER 7

POINTING THE WAY

Alex's whole life was not consumed with business. He found the time to promote culture, education, and religion. His respect for education and religion were conveyed in these words when he addressed the Chatham Academy on April 30, 1830:

Books are companions, who cannot deceive you by flattery, or disappoint you by false hope, but they can assist, ere fortifying you by their philosophy against the ills of life; and support, and sustain you, by their example, amidst the pressure of misfortune.

And those of you will be doubly fortunate, who shall find in Religious Books a solace for disappointed ambition, and a refuge for unmerited calamity.¹

Alex served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Independent Presbyterian Church.² Alex's uncle, William Gibbons, had left one hundred dollars to the Union Society

¹Alexander Telfair Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga. Speech to Chatham Academy on April 30, 1830.

in his will. Thomas Telfair joined the Union Society in 1809. Alex joined in 1819 after Thomas died. Alex served as Vice President in 1825 and in 1830. Alex joined the St. Andrew's Society of the City of Savannah in 1821. On December 20, 1824, Alex signed the Charter to incorporate the Savannah St. Andrews Society.

In 1828 Alex was serving as a Justice of the Inferior Court. In 1825 Alex was "a very active member" on the reception committee for General Lafayette's visit. He was one of the main speakers on Pulaski at the ceremony honoring Pulaski during Lafayette's visit.

The Telfairs usually spent the summer months up North. Alex would visit Philadelphia and New York, But spent most of his time at his "quarters" in Bristol. A trip

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3Union Society, The Union Society Being an Abstract of Exhisting Records From 1750-1858, (Savannah, Ga.: John M. Cooper & Co., 1860) 94.


5Ibid.

6Ibid. 3

7St. Andrew's Society, History of the St. Andrew's Society of Savannah, no author (Savannah: Kennickell, 1950) 15.


from Savannah to Philadelphia could take four days by sea and two by land. On his travels Alex paid close attention to the growing of crops and fruits in regard to the return to the "husbandman."

On one of these vacations in August of 1823, Alex visited Robert Habersham's son in Elizabeth Town. The young Habersham was at school recuperating from an illness. This was one time that Alex could do something for Robert Habersham while Habersham was looking after Alex's affairs at home. After the middle of October the Southerners would return back home.

On February 22, 1832, Alex delivered a speech to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of George Washington. Alex said that military talent was one of the lower forms of genius, but that it was not the case with Washington. Alex closed this speech with a charge which he had taken up, but would lay down in death later that year when he said:

10 Robert Habersham Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga., Letters from Alexander Telfair to Robert Habersham.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

In the physical world, the process of decay is the principle of renovation: and as the prostrate and decaying trunk of the once towering Oak, nourishes the tender shrubs which its branches lately sheltered, and multiplies itself in their increasing growth, and vigor; so, the Generations which have passed from Earth too, however are renovated in You, and it is Yours in turn to shelter; to nourish; and to point the way!\(^\text{14}\)

The Committee of arrangements for the Celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of the birth of Washington requested that they be given a copy of the speech for publication. Alex humbly declined stating that he thought that the speech had achieved its purpose and that a close scrutiny in print would reveal its imperfections.\(^\text{15}\)

Mary confided in a letter to her friend, Mary Few, that she was afraid that Alex's health was not up to delivering this speech. Alex's sister said that she had stolen a copy of the manuscript so that Mary Few could read it when she came to Georgia.\(^\text{16}\)

A few months later, Alex was on a trip to Philadelphia to meet his sisters,\(^\text{17}\) when he became ill and died at Winchester, Virginia, on October 8, 1832.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{14}\)Alexander Telfair, Telfair Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

\(^{15}\)Ibid.


Savannah, Georgia
May 28, 1988

Dear Alex,

I know you don't hear me, but I just had to have this one-sided conversation anyway. I haven't totally lost my mind. Why, I only talked to you once during my three visits to your final resting place. I just wanted to thank you for being the gentleman and scholar you were. You were one important part in the benefit of the Telfair legacy starting with your father and ending with your grand nephew as he went all the way to the Supreme Court in trying to acquire the Telfair Estate. He failed and your sister's will was upheld providing for your home to be turned into a museum which has benefited patrons of art and history for many years.

It is because of you that I have a greater appreciation of history; I have acquired a friendship with the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Georgia Historical Society.

Your Twentieth Century Friend,

[Signature]

p.s. If you aren't the gentleman you appear to be, I'll find out one day.
Dear Reader,

This biography, or should I say - introductory biography; of Alexander Telfair was written so I could possibly pass History 300 at Armstrong State College. This paper was completed only because of the inspiration that I received researching into the past life and time of a man and era of which I had little knowledge. Now I have an idea of how little I really know.

I kept telling myself that if I had more time, I could do a better job. If I had more time, I would only try to find out more about Alex. Then I would make some of the same errors in trying to compile some of my findings. I hope the imperfections did not dampen your appreciation of the times of Alexander Telfair.

Much information is still available here in Savannah. If you are really interested, visit the Georgia State Archives and Perkins Library, Duke University.

Best wishes to you in your search of knowledge, whether it be Alexander Telfair's nineteenth century or today.

Sincerely

William C. Hamilton
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