

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society

Aaron Burr, Vice President of the United States under Thomas Jefferson, was always a schemer, and frequently in need of a source in funds. Born in Albany, New York, his wife died when his daughter, Theodosia Bartow Burr, was very young. They were devoted to each other and he raised her with a knowledge of worldly matters not usually known to women.

Young Joseph Alston, a wealthy planter of the elite, aristocratic Alstons of Georgetown, was in New York on a horse race buying trip when he met the lovely Theodosia Burr, daughter of Aaron Burr. This was a financial match made in heaven as Mr. Burr viewed it. Theodosia and Joseph actually fell in love and were married on March 4, 1801.

Joseph brought his bride to his plantation, The Oaks, located within what is now Brookgreen Gardens. A wealthy rice planter, they enjoyed a secluded life on the plantation although Theodosia sometimes missed city life. Arron Burr probably visited her several times in Georgetown at their home.

During the early years of Theodosia's marriage, Arron Burr became embroiled in bouts of slander with Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury. The culmination came on July 11, 1804 when they dueled at Weehawken, New Jersey, just across the river from New York. Although Hamilton intended to shoot and miss, as often happened in these affairs of honor, Arron Burr did not. He struck Hamilton, wounding him mortally. He died the next day.

Burr was a wanted man as questions surrounded the conduct of the duel. He fled and hatched a scheme to overthrow the government of Mexico, to install himself as emperor and Theodosia as the empress. His main slip up was that he tried to induce General Wilkinson in New Orleans to use American troops as well as his own private army. His plot was uncovered, he fled east possibly to reach Theodosia, but was arrested in Mississippi. He stood trial in Richmond, Virginia for treason, but was found not guilty on a technicality. A second witness to his scheme could not be found. He was ruined politically, socially, and monetarily. He went to Europe on a self imposed exile.

One son was born to Joseph and Theodosia, Aaron Burr Alston in 1802. At the age of 9 years old, the child contracted what was known as swamp fever. It could have been any one of the dreaded diseases so often striking down anyone of any age. He did not survive. Theodosia was so heart broken, she contacted her father and asked him to meet her in New York. She came into Georgetown to stay in the Mary Man House on Front Street to await the arrival of the packet "Patriot" to take her to New York. She boarded the Patriot on December 31, 1812. All we know for sure is that the ship never arrived. The prevailing theory was that the ship went down in a storm off the Outer Banks as often happened. However, another theory is that the Patriot was captured by pirates who forced all aboard to walk the plank.

Another story was that after all walked the plank, Theodosia was taken prisoner and held against her will. No demand for ransom was ever made, no note from her ever arrived.

Joseph, being the newly elected governor, was not allowed to leave South Carolina during his term of office, or he would have accompanied her and been lost as well. He finished his term as governor and returned to planting. He was in Charleston in 1816 when he, too, contracted fever and like his son, did not survive. He is buried beside little Arron Burr Alston, at The Oaks, but sadly, there is no grave for Theodosia.