

## Museum Around the Corner

### The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

#### Storm Towers ©

The coastline of Georgetown County has always been vulnerable to the whims of nature, especially when they come in the form of a howling, blinding hurricane. Such was the case on September 27, 1822. More than 300 slaves were lost. In the aftermath, the great loss of life and total destruction in most of Georgetown County, was seen as a humanitarian and economic disaster. A short time later in the Santee River delta, the construction of some peculiar buildings began, which were hoped to bring safety to those most in harm's way. On Murphy's Island there is the remains of one storm tower but another one is found intact in the delta.

In March and April, the slaves would leave the plantations to go to the remote rice fields of the Santee Delta to plant rice seeds. Their small villages contained the necessities such as a well, cooking area, and dwellings consisting of wooden houses that were the usual style of a square or rectangle, with porches and slanted roofs, made of wood frame. However, flat surfaces of flimsy wood construction do not hold up well in heavy winds and rains of severe storms. They begin to fall apart if not constructed well and are flattened quickly given enough force against them. The storm towers were constructed near the villages. As late as fifty years ago, remnants of these communities were still visible in the more than a dozen brick chimneys.

The days of early notification of impending storms was yet to come, unless one encountered the ghostly Gray Man whose existence seems to be to warn islanders to leave the beach before it is too late. Otherwise, it was anyone's guess if the current bad weather was just a thunderstorm or a two day hurricane, or anything in between.

The interesting buildings that were constructed after the Storm of 1822 were storm protection towers. They were circular, about ten feet off the ground to protect against the storm surge, and built of sturdy brick. There had been so much destruction, as related in the stories after the storm, it is thought that perhaps these towers were constructed from brick salvaged from derelict buildings, providing a large resource of building materials. The structures were made of Charleston grey brick laid in English bond which provides added strength. Oddly enough, the remaining chimney stacks were made of Georgetown brick, orange in color. Perhaps these chimneys were constructed after the towers which weathered the storms while the villages did not and had to be rebuilt.

David Doar, in his "Rice and Rice Planting in the South Carolina Low Country" describes the these towers in 1970. "After [the Storm of 1822] the planters of those places had built what were called storm towers. These were of brick, round with conical roofs and were 20 or 30 feet in diameter and 20 feet high. About ten feet from the ground was an entrance to the floor at this height from below, and were fitted with heavy doors and windows. Upon approach of threatened weather all hands were taken into them until the danger was over. Until a few years ago these towers could be seen, like sentinels standing amid abandoned houses and fields. Now they have been pulled down for the bricks and only one was standing on Moorland Plantations a few years ago, and even this may be gone like its fellows by now."

The amazing aspect is that the builders knew in 1823 that the round form was right to deflect wind and water so that it flowed around them, causing little destruction. In the Santee River Delta, there were seven towers built. They resemble a type of defensive tower built in the British Empire called Martello Towers. These fortresses were larger, multi-storied, and used for a different reason. They housed 15 – 20 soldiers and were sometimes 40 feet tall, ideal to look out over the terrain for invaders.

One may wonder why more of these towers were not built on the grounds of the plantations for the use of the families and in areas of population. The answer may lie in the construction methods of the day. Masonry foundations and building practices of using massive heart pine beams and cypress siding proved strong enough to withstand heavy blows. Even today, we still have many plantation mansions and town houses that were built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Peachtree, Hampton, and Hopsewee, all in the Santee area, have robust masonry foundations with cellar spaces. These likely served as shelters during tropical systems. They have weathered many hurricanes over the centuries.

The presence of these towers, yet again, adds to the unique heritage of the Gullah Culture of Georgetown County. They are a symbol of the ingenuity and skill of the enslaved Africans who built them.

Excerpts for this article came from “Documenting the Storm Towers of the Santee Delta” by Brent Fortenberry, Alena Franco, Margaret Graham, Tommy Graham for the Clemson - Walter Lasch Conservation Center.