

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

William Swinton ©

In the May 14, 1970 issue of the Georgetown Times, Mrs. Gertrude Bull wrote a wonderful article on a very prominent Georgetown man in his time. The name of William Swinton is very much associated with the founding of Georgetown and he is responsible for the look and layout of the town. He was a man of many facets and held positions of responsibility throughout his life here. Here are excerpts of that article.

“ Our first introduction to William Swinton occurs in the Parish Register of Prince George Winyah Parish when he was elected by the Wardens and Vestry to serve as “Overseer of the Poor” on April 19th, 1731. In the same Parish Register there is recorded his marriage On October 22, 1730, to Hanna Brown, Widow and a plat showing his owning Pew No. 7 in the Parish Church of Prince George Winyah. [This would be the Black River Church of Prince George, before the Parish Church was built in Georgetown in 1745.] His association with the rector of Prince George leaves us with a feeling of frustration since William Swinton was ordered to pay a fine of ten pounds for making accusations against the Rev. Thomas Morritt, and on the same day he was sworn in as ‘Overseer of the Poor’, a very important job.

He was the fourth son of Sir John, ninth of the name and a direct descendent of Robert Stuart III who was King of Scotland from 1371-1390. He came from a large family of nine children. He and Hannah had three children and among his descendents can be found some of the most prominent families in early Georgetown: Ward, Legare, Scott, Ball, Bryan, Dwight, Chisholm, MacIntosh, Bonneau, McCall, Laval, Wayne, Deveaux, Laurens, Haskell, Simon, Seabrook, Murray, McLeod, and Fitzsimmons.

Though William was not one of the first settlers in this area, he certainly was one of the most outstanding and powerful leaders of the time. His election by the Vestry and Wardens of Prince George Parish as “Overseer of the Poor” showed their confidence in his integrity and ability, since this was a position of great responsibility.

He was appointed Deputy Naval Officer for the Port of Winyah on May 20, 1734. His duties in this capacity were laying buoys, erecting beacons, and maintaining pilot boats. He and other Commissioners also had to assess “every inhabitant, proprietor and owner of lands and slaves in the Parishes of Prince George and Prince Frederick, and owners of town lots in Georgetown...proportionately. All vessels which shall come to the port of Georgetown, Winyah, shall be liable to pay the same powder money as ships and vessels that go to Charleston. “

On January 16, 1734, Elisha Screven executed a deed of conveyance of the town to three men: George Pawley, William Swinton, and Daniel LaRoche. In addition to his many other duties, William Swinton was a Surveyor of the Town of Georgetown. His work should, and always will be, a monument to this greatness. The original plot containing all the streets with a Town Common, a House of Correction, a Gaol, (jail) , a fort and lots reserved for places of worship, is a masterpiece in engineering skills. The

original plot extended from Wood Street on the north to Cannon Street on the south. No other town in the Province was laid out to such an advantage. The streets were wide and regular and on three sides terminating on the marsh or water, for Georgetown was laid out on a beautiful peninsula, bounded on the north by the "Wahau River", on the east by the "Weenea River" and on the south by the "Sampeet Creek". The original plot called for no business houses to be built on the Sampit River on what is now Front Street, originally called Bay Street. This beautiful plan by William Swinton is being enjoyed today by the present inhabitants.

Since we had no newspaper in Georgetown (the first came in 1798), lots were first advertised for sale in the Charleston Gazette in 1734. All sales were on the condition that the purchaser would build a house within eighteen months of brick or frame, not less than 22 x 16 feet with a brick chimney. Failure to follow these dictates resulted in forfeiture of the lot. Georgetown continued to grow nicely and by 1747, all lots were sold. However, we didn't pass the small town size for the first 250 years because Winyah Bay has been too shallow to allow the large trading vessels, but even so, we developed very nicely. If William Swinton could see Georgetown now, he would be suitably proud of his part in the forming of this "City on the Sampit".