

Museum around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

The Ford's Store ©

Another prominent Georgetown businessman who has contributed to the success of Georgetown in the late 19th Century and into the 20th, is Charles LaHue Ford. Born to Stephen and Elizabeth LaHue Ford on October 22, 1859, Charles was one of eight children. The story of his prestigious business was printed in the Georgetown Times on June 14, 1994 by Maxine Hawkins.

"A unique store was opened by Mr. C.L. Ford in 1881. The front of the store opened onto Front Street for walk-in business, but the back of the store was on the Sampit River where boats could dock and pick up supplies. I remember the store quite well and it always fascinated me. It was actually two store buildings [at 711-713 Front Street]. One side contained the groceries, dry goods and meats, and the other side was the hardware and ship's chandlers store. There was a large opening between the two stores near the back.

You could purchase almost anything there, from canned rattlesnake, the finest caviar and wines to dry beans and Vienna sausage or the best cuts of beef and pork. The hardware also had some of everything, ropes, chains, nails, or anything you needed for boats. You could buy a ship's wheel, propellers, running lights and all sorts of fishing and hunting gear. Both stores carried a versatile inventory as they catered to all walks of life from the poor to the wealthy plantation owners who entertained quite lavishly at times.

The Ford's store was a wonderful meeting place for many locals who sat around swapping tales. I remember when I was quite young, my father was working for the U.S. Corp of Engineers and we were living in Georgetown at the time. He went to Ford's store one Saturday morning and didn't return home for quite a few hours. My mother was frantic. It seems he ran into Col. Wilkinson who owned Hopsewee Plantation. He and my father got to talking and Col Wilkinson invited him to lunch at the Plantation. My father couldn't telephone my mother because we had no phone. I suppose I remember the incident so well because my mother raised so much hell! But as I said, the store was a great meeting place.

C.L. Ford and his sons, Albert W. Sr. and Ralph M. Sr. also had a building supply business on Fraser Street. When Mr. Archer Huntington began development of Brookgreen Gardens and began to build his home, Atalaya, on Huntington Beach, he purchased all the brick and building materials from them and they delivered the materials by barges up the Waccamaw River. Ralph Ford, Jr. tells me that Mr. Huntington once ordered a donkey and a Ford automobile and had them charged to his grocery account. Ralph also said the Huntingtons had the entire Ford family to a sumptuous dinner once a year at Atalaya.

The Ford Store was paymaster for Brookgreen Gardens, Arcadia Plantation, and South Island Plantation, belonging to Mr. Tom Yawkey. All these plantations, including Hobcaw, Bellefield and others had boats that ran daily to the Ford Store for groceries and supplies.

Ralph Jr. told me about Mr. Huntington going to the store the day before the stock market fell and the Depression was at hand. He gave Ralph's grandfather, C.L. Ford, \$10,000 so that Mr. Ford could continue to carry some of the people's charge accounts. Many folks remember what the Ford Store had done for them during those hard times as did Mrs. Dingle, who ran the Tip Top Inn on Pawleys Island. She was

loyal to the Ford Store and always bought from them year round, even though many items wholesaled for many years. Most folks did not know the part Mr. Huntington played that enabled Mr. Ford to carry their accounts.

Another story that Ralph Jr. told me, and one I'd heard before, was about Mr. Don Swett's grandfather, Mr. McDonald, going by the Ford Store on his way home from Hobcaw. When he arrived home, he told his wife that Mr. Dicky (C.L. Ford) had told him the bank would not be open the following day. She made him go back across the Bay in a storm and withdraw all the money they had in the bank. Mr. Dicky was right! The bank did not reopen. The Depression was here and the Stock Market crashed.

The street walk-in business was small compared to the deliveries they made by horse and buggy for many years to some plantations and in-city deliveries. They also handled all the groceries for International Paper Co. tugboats which were very plentiful years ago, plus many yachts traveling on the Intracoastal Waterway stopped in for groceries and supplies.

Some years ago, the Ford family decided to divide the businesses and properties of C.L. Ford. Ralph Ford, Jr. and his brother, Billy, became the owners of the Ford Store. Ralph ran the grocery store and Billy operated the hardware store until his death in 1963. Ralph ran both stores for a few years and then sold both stores to Heywood Supply from Charleston and they finally closed in 1966.

Beulah Seale worked as a clerk with Ralph for about 20 years. On August 6, 1966, she and Ralph walked out, locked the doors and closed the Ford Store forever. So ended another era that will never return. “

Another article in the Georgetown Times of April 7, 1901 states, “Mr. C. L. Ford is building a very handsome residence, corner of Front and Wood Streets.” The house at 1101 Front Street, remains today with only minor alterations to the exterior. However, originally it had a very Victorian cupola topping the roof of the small upstairs porch. The house suffered a fire around 1930 in which the cupola was destroyed, but Mr. Ford insisted in putting it back. Another fire circa 1937 damaged the house significantly. Again the house was restored, but this time without the cupola.