

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Marsh Island Windmill ©

In the 1700's, Marsh Island, the surrounding islands, and salt marsh near the mouth of the South Santee River on the Atlantic Ocean, were owned by Thomas Lynch. He was a rice planter at Hopsewee Plantation on the banks of the North Santee River who served as a delegate to the Continental Congress. His son, Thomas Lynch Jr., signed the Declaration of Independence after the elder Lynch died of a stroke in 1776. Thomas, Jr. was lost at sea three years later, on a sea voyage. Upon Thomas, Jr.'s death, Marsh Island and other Lynch holdings were passed to his sister, Sabina Lynch. Sabina later married John Bowman, educated son of the Lord Provost of Glasgow, Scotland. Their union would set in motion a series of events that shaped the course of South Carolina's history.

The first event occurred on King Street in Charleston. Bowman noticed a working windmill perched on a store gable and inquired within. He learned that Jonathan Lucas, a recent arrival in America, had constructed the windmill. Lucas, who was a skilled millwright from Cumberland, England, had ended up in South Carolina in 1784 by happenstance, having been on his way to the Caribbean when the ship was blown off course and he was shipwrecked near the mouth of the Santee River. Following their meeting in Charleston, Bowman hired Lucas in 1787 to construct what would be the first water-powered rice pounding mill on Peach Island Plantation on the Santee River. The Plantation was a gift from Thomas Lynch Sr. to Thomas Jr., upon his marriage to Sally Shubrick, and it had been passed to Sabina when Thomas Jr. died. Lucas' rice pounding mill "cleaned" the rice (removed the outer husk) far faster than manual methods. His invention would soon be used on other plantations as well, leading to great prosperity and wealth throughout the rice planters' region. Bowman then hired Lucas to construct a saw mill on Marsh Island, a barrier island near the mouth of the South Santee River. The island was readily accessible by boat, in close proximity to the mouth of the Santee River, and had immediate access to wind energy that could be harnessed at little cost. Lucas accepted the offer and moved to Marsh Island where he lived during construction. His son, William (later of The Wedge Plantation) was born there in 1789.

When the project began, Marsh Island became known as Mill Island. Lucas coordinated his construction needs with the mainland by letter and passenger pigeon. The finished project has been described as a Dutch-style wooden windmill fitted onto a brick tower. There is some indication that Lucas re-purposed a windmill he had built for Bowman earlier on Hog Island in Charleston Harbor, to complete the project.

The inventor, Jonathan Lucas, owned extensive lands along the Santee River as well as valuable property in Charleston. Earlier, the inventor had designed the tidal powered mills that husked rice and ground corn with power obtained from waterwheels operated on both the incoming and outgoing tides. There were a number of these cleverly designed machines that easily polished the rice, taking most of the tedious labor out of that chore.

The windmill blades were attached to a 16-foot iron shaft and a second horizontal shaft operated several reciprocating saw blades. Just how mill-wrights managed to cast so large a piece of iron that was the shaft connecting the mechanism to the arms of the windmill is not clear but it is most certainly one of the largest pieces of solid cast iron in existence in this country.

Logs for the mill were cut on the mainland and drifted on the tides in rafts seaward to the mill which was placed on the island because of the almost constant breezes near Cape Romain.

After Lucas completed the saw mill in 1792, logs were rafted down the Santee River and then to Mill Island, where they were sawn into lumber. From Mill Island the lumber was shipped to Charleston, Georgetown, and elsewhere, producing raw materials for a rapidly growing State. For nearly 30 years, the sawmill on Mill Island produced lumber. Confusion often arose when ships sailing near the coast mistook the sawmill for a lighthouse.

When the second lighthouse was built on Northeast Raccoon Key in 1857, the remains of the old mill were removed. The mill's 16-foot shaft and gear are now on display on the lawn at the Village Museum in McClellanville, SC (<http://www.villagemuseum.com/>) In 1932, one hundred forty years after Mill Island's saw mill supported construction in South Carolina's Lowcountry, the unique habitat values of the Lynch family's former land holdings were recognized. The island and surrounding marsh were included in the newly created Cape Romain Migratory Bird Refuge.

(Taken from an article in the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, South Carolina, Lowcountry Refuges Complex July, 2012, Volume 5 and from an article by Charleston columnist Jack Leland, undated and source unknown)