

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Friendfield Plantation ©

In the aftermath of the Civil War, terrible conditions faced the formerly wealthy and prosperous rice planters of the previous decades. Recovery was bleak, with the loss of their fortunes and no hope of any future income. Workers idled, houses fell into disrepair, but families stuck together as best they could. Georgetown had been the wealthiest County in the entire United States from the production of rice, made possible by the thousands of enslaved Africans who brought their knowledge of rice cultivation with them from Africa. With the loss of the rice industry, Dr. Alexius Mador Forster, III believed he had found an answer in future growth and prosperity in a plant not tried before in the Georgetown area.

He owned Friendfield Plantation on the Sampit River. The beautiful and stately home, built in 1818, had been so named when its builder, Francis Withers, tried to repay his brother, John, the money he had borrowed to erect his plantation manor house. John took the note of his brother, tore it up and forgave the debt. The name of the plantation changed that day from Washington Plantation to Friendfield, in honor of the close familial ties exhibited by these two brothers. A great deal of material with which the house was built was brought from England and no expense was spared in making it one of the finest manor houses in this part of the state. The wallpaper used was of the hand painted variety, and all of the rooms were furnished throughout in the elegant style of the day.

When Francis Withers died in 1847, Friendfield passed to his son-in-law, Dr. Forster. He survived the Civil War, having been a battlefield surgeon, and returned to plantation life, such as it was, tending to the sick in the area. Having lost all fortune, labor force, and capital, he thought of another way to earn an income, and settled on the cultivation of tea. The cultivation of tea plants required less hands-on labor and after experimentation, Dr. Forster found the tea plant was well suited and began to flourish at his plantation on the Sampit River.

According to James Wesley McClain, great grandson of Dr. Forster, "Forster was among a group of southern planters greatly enthusiastic about tea growing. He tested the soils to see which types were most conducive to tea culture and planted teas of several varieties. The original test plot of half a dozen tea plants quickly grew, and his plants spread to a half acre around the manor. The plant was evergreen and hardy in the Lowland Country, growing six feet tall." With great enthusiasm, he planted tea gardens, and became more successful than other attempts in Charleston and Greenville. He foresaw the crop to be the salvation of the ruined economy of South Carolina.

"Forster was anxious to know if his vigorous tea plants could produce quality tea, and he sent an assortment of uncured leaves to a prominent Baltimore firm of tea importers. After months of anxious waiting, the report came back: The leaves had been cured, tested, and pronounced superior in flavor to the finest Chinese Teas, then considered to be the world's best."

He was a member of that fallen aristocracy of former plantation owners and enjoyed the company of his peers. When Plowden Charles Jeanette Weston, owner of Hagley Plantation died in 1864, Dr. Forster, being a member of the Vestry of Prince George Episcopal Church in 1872, paid a call to Hagley Plantation at the request of William St. Julian Mazyck, probably the executor of the will and estate of Mr. Weston. Mr. Mazyck offered the stained glass windows, clock, and bell currently placed in St. Mary's Chapel for Slaves, the slave church on Hagley Plantation, to Prince George Church. With St. Mary's in ruins, it was thought these fixtures would be destroyed or stolen. Dr. Forster and Mr. Ralph Izard accepted these treasures for the Vestry of Prince George, and shortly after they were removed and brought to Prince George and installed. The windows are very fine English stained glass, probably placed in 1857 or 1858 when St. Mary's was under construction. In Prince George Church, they are today the transoms over the north and south doors, and in a prominent place of honor behind the Altar. Dr. Forster's initials are in a panel the north window as a tribute to his work for Prince George Parish.

As his interest in tea culture grew, he still attended to the needs of his patients in the area. He is credited with saving the life of a young girl whose birth portended a very short life. Somehow, he knew what to do and she lived to the age of ninety-six. On July 29, 1879, when she was nine years old, he was summoned to tend to her, and upon returning home that night, his buggy hit a boulder and he was thrown to his death. He never lived to see if his tea cultivation would bear the fortune he hoped for. His wife, not having the faith or interest in tea, abandoned the effort. His son tried to continue the growing and production of tea, but did not have the skill of his father. Had the tea industry continued under the care of Dr. Forster, Georgetown may have been very successful as one of the tea capitals of the world.