

Museum Around the Corner
Georgetown County Museum History Center

Jacob Motte Alston ©

One of the best books about life in the early 1800s in Georgetown is a memoir of Jacob Motte Alston, known as Motte. The title is "Rice Planter and Sportsman, Memoirs of J. Motte Alston". He was the grandson of William Alston, the first "one L" Alston, also known as King Billy who was one of the wealthiest rice planters in Georgetown. In this memoir, written for his grandchildren, Motte reveals many interesting facets of life growing up at Clifton Plantation and in Charleston. Born in 1821, he lost his mother early. He lived with his grandparents and father, Thomas Pinckney Alston, at Clifton and enjoyed a carefree life of a young child on the Waccamaw River.

Summers were spent on Debordieu which was named after the Frenchman who lived there. The house was the same one used by Joseph and Theodosia Burr Alston, daughter of Vice President of the United States, Aaron Burr. The room occupied by Motte was the same one in which young Aaron Burr Alston died of fever in 1812. The house survived the massive Storm of 1822.

The yearly grand trek to Charleston began with a passage over the Waccamaw and PeeDee rivers, into Georgetown's back landing. From there, they crossed the Sampit River, continuing to the Santee River and delta. Motte recalled that his grandmother grew up on the Santee and saw great flocks of green parquets, extinct by 1821. By late afternoon they reached the "32 Mile House" located halfway to Charleston. They stopped for the night there and pressed on to Charleston, arriving by the afternoon of the next day. Their destination was the King Street House of his grandmother, Mary Brewton Motte Alston. This palatial home was used by British Lord Rawdon and by Colonel Balfour. Later, large parties were held there for Joseph Alston in his successful bid for Governor of South Carolina.

Motte's grandfather always had a family dinner every Saturday when all his sons, daughters and grandchildren were expected to attend. The table extended across the entire room and was graced with beautiful damask, china, crystal, and silver. Motte learned how to distinguish the various fine wines of his grandfather's attic wine rooms when his grandmother assigned him the task of bringing down to her those she had chosen to serve at dinner. Following her lead, he tasted each one to be sure it was the right one.

He recalls the day that the Marquis de Lafayette visited Charleston in 1825 or 26. Being of small stature, Motte stood on the porch of St. Michael's and was particularly impressed with the remarkable feature of the cocked hat worn by the French general.

In February, his grandparents enjoyed the grand balls and parties of the High Society season, with horseracing in Charleston, Columbia and Camden. It was mentioned that his Uncle Tom would leave his plantation, Strawberry Hill, on Waccamaw at 7:00 am, and reach Charleston in time to dress for the theater.

At his departure for college in Baltimore, his grandmother sent him off with a prayer book and Bible. Little did Motte know that he would never see her again. He was of fragile health himself from the overheated rooms at the school. His father, Thomas, came to retrieve him. He stayed in Richmond, Virginia on the way, where his hotel caught fire and he nearly lost his life. Motte returned home with his

father to the sad realization that his grandmother had died and his grandfather was 80 years old and failing fast. After two years of convalescence enjoying hunting, fishing, riding, and boating, Motte's health was recovered.

Motte was returned to Georgetown to his father's plantation, Maryetta. The house at Maryetta was one story with wide piazzas, nestled among enormous pines. It was located on what is now Hobcaw Barony. Eventually, Maryetta was sold and Thomas bought True Blue Plantation and the adjoining Weehawka.

As a young man, Motte began the life of a planter by tending to his father's acreage. Thomas gave him 600 acres on the Waccamaw and PeeDee at True Blue and Weehawka. He entered into the hard life of a small planter when he bought his own acreage at the south tip of Pawleys Island. He named it Woodbourne. His fields were 15 acres in size, the hand dug ditches were 15 feet wide by four feet deep. Best acreage yielded between \$150 and \$200. Rice was shipped in tierces, large vessels that contained 600 pounds of white rice. Motte earned a modest fortune and created Sunnyside in Murrells Inlet. He is the very last rice planter to go into that business in Georgetown County.