

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Murder of Andrew Johnstone ©

Andrew Johnstone, owner of Annandale Plantation, later renamed Millbrook, was a prominent Georgetown rice planter who annually took his family to cooler climes to escape the heat and mosquitos of the Lowcountry from May to October. He sold Annandale in 1863 and retired to Flat Rock, North Carolina. The following story, reported in Georgetown Times, date unknown, by Louise Bailey brings to light the troubling times of the era even in an idyllic setting.

“Julia Reed knew only too well the difficulties facing those South Carolinians gathered at Flat Rock [North Carolina] to escape the dangers in their war torn State. Yet her confidence that better days lay ahead, her hopes that refused to be dimmed, marked the letters she wrote to her son – until, without warning or reason, tragedy struck the Flat Rock colony. On the morning after the terrible incident, Julia Reed made no attempt to hide the bitterness and grief that gripped the community, for Andrew Johnstone, rice planter of Georgetown S.C., and for more than twenty years a member of the Flat Rock Summer colony, had been murdered. Her letter of June 11, 1864 bears quoting, for it is history.

“The startling information your Doctor gave you last night of our dear friend Mr. Johnstone’s death is too true. He did not live an hour. He said to his wife, ‘My dear, I am sorry to leave you so soon, but in a few minutes I am to appear in the presence of my Maker...Bring the children each to me to bid goodbye – not together, for it is more than I can endure, but one by one.’

“What a fearful tragedy! What a commentary upon the truth – in the midst of life we are in death...I am told only a few days ago he wrote a friend he has never been as happy, that he sold his plantation and was rid of the responsibility and intended to enjoy the rest of his life with his houseful of pretty children. This whole thing is diabolical! The men came while he was at dinner with his family. He told the family to leave the table and go to their rooms. The men asked for food for their horses for four days. He told them he was sorry not to be able to give it to them and stated how difficult it is now to get corn. One of them replied, “You will give us dinner then.’ Mr. Johnstone said, ‘Certainly, with pleasure’, and invited them into his dining room.

“One man said he did not care to eat and he loitered about the front door. Elliott, Mr. Johnstone’s 12-year-old son, suspected something wrong and went to his room to get his gun and ammunition. The men ate their dinner, Mr. Johnstone keeping off the flies. A small Negro boy was the only person present. He says one of the men said, ‘Mr. Johnstone, you are our prisoner,’ When Mr. Johnstone asked, ‘For what?’ one man said to the others, ‘Fire!’ and shot Mr. Johnstone. The men rushed into the entry. Mr. Johnstone wore arms always and the only conjecture made is that he may have put his hand toward his pistol and the men may have thought he would shoot them.

“Elliott, with his gun loaded with buckshot, fired down the entry. Three men he certainly wounded, and Mr. J. had strength to walk to the door and fire his revolver. Elliott rushed to the door and a wounded man had rolled off the front steps toward the fountain. Elliott saw him draw his pistol and he dropped his head or stooped, and the ball passed over into the wall and through a picture frame. Elliott then fired at the man whom he saw in the garden and knew nothing more of him until this morning when the wretch was found quite near the house, having dragged himself to water and propped himself against

the fence. He begged for his life and said he had not shot Mr. Johnstone, but that Captain Hines had ordered his Lieutenants' to blow his brains out.

"...The fellow says they were trying to cross over to a camp on Green River, and that he only joined these men at 12:00 that day.

"Elliott's conduct was heroic...A party is in pursuit of a man shot in the foot who was seen yesterday passing Drake's and he, it is supposed, is the man who shot Mr. J. There were six men. Dr. King seems to think the purpose was plunder, that they thought Mr. J was rich, for the wretch found this morning was well dressed and has about \$20 in gold and silver, \$20 in Confederate money, a lady's broche, a bracelet and some other love tokens in his pocket. He was an exceedingly handsome fellow not more than 22.

"Indeed the one committed to jail is also fine looking. One is from an Alabama regiment, proving they are deserters. What a horrible atrocity is this murder of Mr. Johnstone in our midst. I have never heard anything to exceed it.

"I'on Lowndes had just reached home when the alarm of this outrage was given. He rushed off and found the wretch that was sent to jail. A number were out hunting him. They tracked him by the gore. I'on leveled his gun at him, but the wretch begged not to be shot.

Just imagine the scene at 'Beaumont', hitherto a place of conviviality and pleasure. Elliott, the only man and defender, with the Governess and housekeeper, of eight women and children until the neighbors could be summoned and the Doctor sent for...No one at Flat Rock could have been taken who was more devoted to your father's family and me.

"The men had no horses. The rations for them was therefore a subterfuge."

Thus was the haven of families from war torn South Carolina suddenly shattered. What Julia Reed wrote of it belongs to Flat Rock's history.