

## Museum Around the Corner

### The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

#### North Island ©

The following story is excerpted from an article in the Georgetown Times of January 18, 1929. "Where now breaks the surf on a little beach island, fifteen miles from the City of Georgetown, once stood a flourishing village the existence of which has almost faded from the memory of man. At one time a part of North Island, the isle made famous by the first landing of Marquis de Lafayette in America, "North Inlet", as it is now called, is separated from the larger body of land by a narrow inlet, formed when the disastrous storm of 1822 descended on the coast with terrific fury.

Before the great storm, North Island and North Inlet were one. Adjacent to winding creeks which abounded in the choicest fish, oysters and clams and free of the dreaded mosquito, the island was a resort for the rice planters and Georgetownians in the last of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Fleeing from the dreaded malaria, scores of families erected cottages and shops and prepared to enjoy the glorious season from the last of May through the month of September.

And here the summer colony flourished until the storm of 1822. Says S.D. Magill: "On the night of September 18, 1822, occurred the greatest era in the history of the area as events happening just before and just after its advent were ascertained from that night in the absence of family records of births and deaths among the older people, especially the Negro ones, many of whom reckon their ages by referring to that epoch."

Says the historian, "The hurricane came from the eastern direction for a few hours and then there was a calm, but before the people could kindle a fire, it returned from the west with greater violence and destruction. One of the most serious cases was that which befell old Mr. James McDowell, a Scotsman by birth, now a rice planter, who with his family was residing on North Island at the time, together with other planters, this island being then the favorite health resort of the Georgetown district. That night his house was washed away and to his horror, he saw his wife and children for the last time struggling in the surging billows of North Inlet, now mingled in one body with the mighty Atlantic Ocean, while he escaped death by being washed upon the banks of the mainland.

A weird tale of how a woman foretold the storm years before it happened, and how her daughter and grandchildren were lost when the hurricane washed their house from its moorings, is recalled by a member of the Johnstone family now living in Georgetown [1929], a grand niece of one of the storm's victims. This story has been handed down in the Johnstone family for several generations.

It seems that seven years or so before the disaster, Mrs. Andrew Johnstone, who was then living with her son-in-law, Robert Francis Withers, his wife, formerly Miss Esther Johnstone, dreamt one night that a terrible storm had visited North Inlet, and that her daughter and grandchildren perished in the waves. Mrs. Johnstone said that this dream had made a great impression on her for she saw a vision of Mrs. Withers and the children struggling in the turbulent water for several minutes and then carried under by a foaming wave which blotted everything from sight. She implored her son-in-law to sell his property on the island and move far inland and after much persuasion, Mr. Withers followed her advice. He purchased a home in Stateburg and there lived with his family for several years, far from the sound of the surf which was to bring tragedy to his life.

In 1817, Mrs. Johnstone died and the family decided that there was no use to continue their residence in the up-country for they were all longing for a sight of the sea, and the place where they had spent many happy hours.

Mr. Withers purchased an attractive lot near the water's edge and immediately employed carpenters to build a comfortable and commodious summer cottage. At last the house was completed and the owner planned to hold a housewarming. Everybody was in high spirits. Dainties had been purchased from Georgetown; "creek boys" had been engaged to secure fish and shrimp, and the women of the family had been busily sewing for several weeks on brilliant evening gowns, and gay little dresses for the young ladies of the family. On the night of September 25, 1822, many a guest had assembled in the new abode, and the merriment began. Myriads of candles were lit, and soon was heard the sound of the violin and drum, summoning the young people to the dance. No one heeded the howling of the wind and the dash of rain on the windows, for they thought it was just another summer squall. But the clouds gathered thick and fast, the rain came in torrents, and the tide rose to an alarming height. Preparations were made to abandon the house, but while some of the occupants were making ready, the crash came. With a thud the structure rested on the ground, but the whirring waters had no mercy.

Slowly the building drifted out to sea, with all the lights burning in the inky darkness, a funeral pyre it seemed to the most fortunate ones on the island who made good their escape to the sand hills. Mrs. Withers and her children found a watery grave, as did many of the islands' population, and Mrs. Johnstone's vision was fulfilled even to the smallest detail.

It has been told that two little Alston girls, living on Debordieu Island, just opposite North Island were help up in the window by their Negro nurse to watch the strange spectacle of the Withers' house drift out to sea with all the lights bravely burning. In childish delight the two innocents watched the dwelling float majestically out of sight, little realizing the great tragedy that happened on that dreadful evening.

Not a home remains on North Inlet, just miles of sand, wild shrubbery and the skeleton of a vessel."