

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Francis LeBaron II ©

The late Alberta Lachicotte Quattlebaum was a reporter for the Georgetown Times in her early days. Her stories were always interesting about the town she loved. This article was found in our files at the Museum, but no date was shown on the yellowing paper. It begins with a mystery and ends as a great story, although there is no solution to the question.

“Prince George Episcopal Church, Winyah, has any number of claims to historic fame, but there came in the 1700’s a figure clouded in mystery to give the old church a tinge of pathos and romance that went unknown for over one and one half centuries.

A present member uncovered the story of Francis LeBaron II, who lied buried in the churchyard of Prince George at Georgetown, hundreds of miles from his Plymouth, Mass., home. No one seems to know how this grandson of “a nameless nobleman” came to his untimely death nor how his body came to rest in Georgetown. One wonders if the youthful New Englander died near the Carolina coast on his way back from the West Indies, where a brother lived. His body could have been brought into the port of Georgetown by the ship. Such happenings have been known to occur.

The mystery surrounding the death of Francis II, in a sense, parallels the degree of secrecy that shut the door on the dramatic past of his French grandfather, Francis LeBaron I, when following an unhappy episode, he started a new in America.

Miss Jane Austen, a New England writer, (not to be confused with the English Jane Austen) tells the fascinating story of the LaBaron family in “A Nameless Nobleman” and “Dr. LeBaron and His Daughters.”

Quite by chance the story came to light. Mrs. Charles Weston Rosa of Georgetown, a member of Prince George and one of the state’s most prominent women in the work of the Daughters of the American Revolution, discovered the unpretentious gravestone in 1928. Later that year she received as gifts the two books by Miss Austin from Mrs. Julian Smith of Waterbury, Conn., who had spent a winter in Georgetown. Reading in “Dr. LeBaron and His Daughters” that Francis LeBaron II, “was dead in South Carolina,” Mrs. Rosa wrote the Pilgrim Society of Plymouth to check on the possibility that this grave she had noticed was the resting place of the same Francis LeBaron.

Henry W. Royal, secretary of the society, replied on July 5, 1928 “...The Francis LeBaron who is buried in Georgetown was the grandson of the first Francis LeBaron, and the son of Lazarus. He was born September 3, 1773. The family genealogy mentions that he died in South Carolina but does not state how he happened to be down in Georgetown...”

Francis I, of whom Miss Austin wrote in “A Nameless Nobleman” in the late 19th Century was a colorful, rather debonair figure. Says the author, LeBaron was born and reared as Francois de Martarnaud. As the story goes, Francois’ brother, Gaston, made the mistake of once flirting with a favorite of Louis XIV at the French court within sight of the monarch. For his indiscretion, Gaston was ordered to take on married status to put his officially beyond a similar reoccurrence. He was in effect commanded to marry

his father's ward, a beautiful brunette of 17. Francois yearned to marry the girl himself. The two boys even had a round of fisticuffs over the matter. The younger brother won the fight but immediately lost favor with the girl, his father and brother. Only 20 years old, Francois, aided by his able tutor, hid out until he could leave France. The monk traveled with his pupil during the next seven years as they went from place to place as "citizens of the world." Finally shipwrecked off the New England coast, the story continues, the French nobleman was nursed back to health after the ordeal by a young English girl named Molly Wilder. Before making his escape, Francois married the girl, Molly.

To comply with her husband's wishes to remain in disguise, the girl renamed him. From "Francois, le Baron" as the monk spoke of him, he became Francis LeBaron. He served for two years as physician and surgeon with the French army in America, returning to Plymouth to practice medicine. He died in 1704, leaving one child, Lazarus, who also became a doctor in his native town and the principal figure in Miss Austin's "Dr. LeBaron and His Daughters."

Francis II, was one of Lazarus' large family of children. He married Sarah Bartlett, young sister of his own father's first wife, complicating family ties no little. It seems the doctor was not overly fond of his doubly-related daughter-in-law.

The inscription on the marker over his grave offers little answer, and Francis left no descendents to do research. The crudely-carved words on the stone still are visible. They simply read:

To the memory of
MR. FRANCIS LEBARON
A native of Plymouth
N. England
Who died September 9
1773 aet 24

He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down;
he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not.

The grave marked by a plain slab remains today under the edge of a live oak tree in Prince George churchyard, almost lost among more recent and taller markers – thus the fate of a baron's heir.