

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Hampton Plantation ©

One of the most delightful books written on plantation life is that of Archibald Rutledge of Hampton Plantation. Written in 1941, he chronicles his childhood, that time of innocence and wonder. He is returning to his ancient residence, at that time a 209 year house on the banks of the South Santee River. He was born there, but at the age of thirteen, his family felt that rural children needed the discipline of education and contact with civilization. "Accordingly, a yearling in every sense of the word, I was lassoed and sent to school in Charleston." Now, at the age of fifty six, after an absence of forty four years, he has come home.

"The two-thousand-acre tract lays on the southern bank of the Santee River, which few people realize is the largest river of the eastern United States. It has been in my family since Daniel Horry, one of my Huguenot ancestors, fled from France at the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. It is ten miles up the river from the ocean.

"Sixteen miles from its mouth, the Santee divides; and these two streams flow independently into the ocean. Between them is the lonely delta of the Santee, formerly one of the greatest rice-growing areas of North America, but now returned to a green wilderness as primeval as it must have been in the days of the Indians.

One of the many stories he tells of his childhood escapades involves great danger that would have been easily avoided with a few more years of maturity and his observance of nature. He writes, "There was a notorious old bull alligator in Witch Pond, not far from our plantation house; he had for a certainty killed two calves, several hogs, one of our favorite hounds, and had created a reign of terror among the stock. About him and his depredations the Negroes had a kind of superstition, so that it was in vain that we tried to enlist their aid in ridding the plantation of this malignant brigand. The massive strength of such a creature can readily be imagined. His life is one long murderous career.

"One thing that made an approach to this solitary monster difficult was the fact that Witch Pond was surrounded by dense thickets. Many an attempted stalk of mine was frustrated by the noise that I could not help making. This lone stretch of water was lazily drained by a shallow ditch that conducted the slight overflow through the woods to the distant river. One day I thought of a plan by which I could come upon the minotaur of Witch Pond: I decided to wade into it by way of the ditch, and in this manner silently to approach the monster that, during the heat of the day, had a habit of basking on an old cypress log half-submerged in the water.

"By following the water route I reached the lagoon without making a sound, and as soon as a clear view of the place was afforded, I thrilled to see the vast and scaly bulk of the great reptile prone on the log that he had selected as his favorite haunt when he wanted to sun-bathe. Almost as soon as I saw him, I realized that he was within rifle range; but there were many cypresses growing in the water, some of these intervened between me and my intended prey. Besides, to kill an alligator, the shot should be made in the head or behind the foreshoulder, and neither vital spot was at first visible to me. The footing in the pond was none too good, for, although I was walking but a few feet from the shore, so

soft was the bottom with its bubbling ooze of decayed leaves that the water was almost to my waist. At the time I was ten years old.

“Just as I was raising my rifle I happened to glance back – more from instinct than for any definite reason. To my horror ten feet behind me lay a second alligator, even larger than the one on the log. I, the crafty stalker, had been stalked! In such a crisis one is not likely to remember everything. I recall feeling that I was at the mercy of this second alligator. I recall the slow turn I made, leveling my rifle on this grim submarine. Firing for his head at point-blank range, I dashed wildly and clumsily for the safety of the shore. Reaching the bank, I turned to see what had happened. Over by the log where the first monster had been lying, the waters were rocked into waves that he had started when he had plunged from the log at the report of the rifle. Near the shore, turning in blind circles, was my grim stalker. Another bullet put an end to him. Later we got him ashore, measured and weighed him. His weight was eleven hundred pounds and he was barely short of fourteen feet. His companion I caught on a line three years later and he had grown to even greater size.”

Many more stories, as well as descriptions of life both in Colonial days and in the early 20th Century fill the pages of this book. Hampton Plantation is located about 20 miles south of Georgetown. Operated by the South Carolina State Parks Service, this fascinating site is open and waiting for your visit.