



The Origins of Rose Hill

by Steffani Walther

In 1682 Lord Cardoss from Scotland led a small band from Scotland to South Carolina to settle on Port Royal Island near the present-day site of Beaufort. He claimed co-ordinate authority with the governor and council of Charleston. He then invited the Yemassee Indians to reside on a track of land which is now known as the Rose Hill Plantation. He wanted the Yemassee to reside on the land because he was worried about an invasion by the aggressive Spaniards and wanted to do trade with them as well. The Yemassee only resided in South Carolina for 35 years but were the most important ally we had at that time. In 1715, the Yemassee war broke out and after several years of fighting the tribe then fled to Florida. This would now open up these lands to European settlements as the Spaniards never made it up here past St. Simons, Georgia.

In 1718 King Charles granted the 12,000-acre Barony then known as "Devil's Elbow" (due to its shape) to the Barbadian Planter Lord John Colleton who was one of the original Lord Proprietors. This land was used to grow sea island cotton, indigo, corn and raise cattle. By the 1750's it became a successful plantation. This land was eventually passed down to his grandson by the same name. Before the second Lord Colleton died in 1777 he started selling off parts of his land. The remainder his daughter Louisa Caroline Colleton received through inheritance. She married British Navy Admiral Richard Graves who had also received a grant of land from the British government. Louisa sold off some of her inherited land holdings but the final disbursements weren't made until after her death.

An Episcopal Minister by the name of Mr. Barony and decided to name it "Rose Land" or "Rose Hill". When he died his stepson James Brown Kirk inherited it. Mr. Kirk was nJohn Rose bought 1000 acres of the Colleton not of the prominent merchant planter class but learned how to become a successful planter by having been an overseer for the Colleton family plantations. Mr. Kirk also worked for Louisa Caroline Graves (great granddaughter of the original Lord Proprietor) who also sold off some of her inherited land holdings to James B. Kirk.

From all his hard work James Brown Kirk was able to rise to the status of gentleman planter. He was successful because he worked long hours and paid close attention to all the planting details. Mr. Kirk married Mary Baldwin who was the daughter of Isaac and Sarah Baldwin in 1807. They were originally from New Jersey but then relocated to Hilton Head and became a wealthy planting family. From the very beginning of his planting life he settled in St. Luke's Parish which consisted of Bluffton, Hilton Head and Spring Island. On a high bluff overlooking the May River he built a large home. This would eventually be known as "Kirk's Bluff". This was a desired area to build since it had strong southerly breezes from the river which kept the infectious mosquitoes away and made the humid summer days bearable. There was also another prominent living family in the same area by the name of Pope so a compromise was reached and the town was renamed "Bluff Town" By 1850 he was the second largest cotton planter in the parish. At that time he produced 120 bags of sea island cotton which was worth \$13,344 annually on 3000 acres. He was also the largest producer of butter. He was successful at whatever he raised or grew and rarely sold his plantations. During this time he had 253 slaves working on them.

The tract of land known as "Rose Hill" was given to one of his nine children Caroline upon her marriage to her first cousin (on her father's side) Dr. John Kirk. Dr. Kirk was not only a physician but knew a lot about working plantations since he was raised by his uncle James Brown Kirk. He as well became a very successful and wealthy planter. By 1860 their estate was valued at \$152,000. During their long honeymoon in Europe they started planning the construction of their Gothic Revival style house. This design

of house is thought to be a return to the style of the middle ages with a touch of romanticism of the old English countryside. Construction began before the Civil War and the house was never completed even though the Kirk's were residing there. The family was caught off guard by the Yankees in the midst of a meal and fled to Grahamville (near Ridgeland) temporarily. Dr. Kirk would return to his estate in an attempt to maintain it. But family correspondence show that the Kirks were having a difficult time managing the crops as the former slaves had run away or refused to work for wages. Dr. Kirk was able to keep his estate but never completed the house. Caroline never returned to her home and died in Grahamville in 1864. It is not known why Sherman did not destroy "Rose Hill" as he did with all the surrounding areas. Some like to believe it is the beauty of the architecture.

The Kirk family has retained a collection of letters and other documents which have been assembled in chronological order. The letters can give you an insight of what transpired in the daily lives of the families that lived here. There are living descendants of Lord Colleton and the Kirks which still reside either in Rose hill or the surrounding areas. You can step back into the 19th century and see what life was like before the Civil War on a true Southern Plantation and feel for yourself the daily pleasures and hardships during this eventful time in our history. The communication of family members which were fighting for the "Southern Cause" is clearly described with their feelings written down. Many of the transcribed documents are located at the Heritage Library in Hilton Head as well as the Rose Hill Mansion.

Citations: The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina by William Gilmore Simms; The Continental monthly, Volume 1 Making of America Project by Charles Godfrey Leland; Exploring the Sullivan Tabby Point Ruins of Callawassie Island, South Carolina by William a. Beham; A Collection of Letters and Documents of the Kirk Family presented to Dr. Peoples of the Heritage Library by Edward Kirk Webb; The history of Beaufort, South Carolina 1514-1861 by Rowland, Moore and Rogers; The Rose Hill Plantation Mansion Website. www.rosehillmansion.com; A special Thank You to Cynthia Kirk Martin Glendinning for her help with resources and family pictures who is a direct Kirk descendant and resides in Rose Hill Plantation today.