

“Dear Sister,” Letters From Lawton Plantation

1962 was a fateful year for us. We came to Hilton Head Island for the first time, in March of that year, for a week of our spring vacation. The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, where my husband, Curtiss, was a Master in the Science Department, provides a two-week vacation respite in the spring just at the time when everyone has had enough of winter. We stayed at the small William Hilton Inn where Chukar Partridge was on the regular menu and where a tour of the largely undeveloped Sea Pines Plantation during the day and historical slide lectures or a bingo game at night were big-time entertainment. We decided to buy a lot near the beach with a vague idea of using it for a permanent home site when Curtiss retired in ten years.

That summer Aunt Lottie Hitchcock, at age eighty-three, had to be taken to a nursing home as she needed constant care. She had lived all her life in Woodbury, Connecticut, and most of it in the eighteenth-century house her father, Floyd Frost Hitchcock, had bought in 1878. Because of her collection of dozens of old bottles of all types she had acquired the local name of “The Bottle Woman of Woodbury”. She also had studied the history of the people and homes of the township and had had many articles printed in area publications. The house was full, not only of furniture, but many “keepsakes”, the bottles and papers. For the time being it was decided to store everything in the attic and a couple of back rooms and rent the house to a young family connected with the family firm. We began with the attic as it had been the storehouse for two generations. Everything considered trash was taken out and put on the back porch to go to the town “dump”. In this pile appeared an old leather hand valise, cracked and dried, with its lock gone. I glanced at it, saw that it appeared to be stuffed with newspapers and suggested that Curtiss see if there were anything else of interest. He agreed and began removing the crumpled and yellowed papers. At the bottom he found several packs of small letters, some in envelopes, some not. We glanced at them hurriedly and put them aside to really look at later. Finally everything was boxed

and stored but we took the letters home with us. Sometime during that year Curtiss looked over the packets. One contained twenty-two letters, each written in a very clear hand on small sheets of a fine linen paper. He found they had been written in 1867 by his paternal grandmother, Eliza Ann Summers (Hitchcock), as a young



Eliza Ann Summers, taken about 1869 or two years after her stay on Hilton Head Island.

woman of twenty-three, to her sister, Sarah. Our interest turned to astonishment when we realized that the letters had been written from the island we had visited the previous spring and fallen in love with — Hilton Head! The other packets proved equally interesting; they contained letters from two of Curtiss’ grandfather’s brothers from various Union Army camps, and once again the name of Hilton Head Island appeared, giving us a warm feeling of early connection with that lovely island.

When spring came again, we could scarcely wait to return to Hilton Head to see if we could find any trace of the

Lawton Plantation house where Eliza Ann and her hometown friend, Julia Benedict, had lived. By this time Curtiss had read through several of the letters and learned that Eliza Ann and Julia had gone to Hilton Head Island under the auspices of the American Missionary Association, which was one of the agencies involved in educating the Freedmen and their children. They had lived on the Island for six months in 1867 and Eliza Ann had written to her sister regularly every six or seven days during that period.

As soon as we reached the Island, we contacted Larry Rogers, at that time Director of the Chamber of Commerce, telling him of our find and asking him for help in locating the Lawton Plantation house. He told us he had a map Charles Fraser had recently come by, which indicated fairly clearly where the Lawton Plantation house was. The next day we drove in Larry’s car down the sand road called “Plantation Drive”. We parked and walked in the general direction of the marsh through tall grass, avoiding as best we could the thick bushes alongside the footpath. Presently we came to a short avenue of towering oaks with festoons of Spanish moss hanging lazily from the branches; the effect was almost that of being in a cathedral. Beyond, in a weed-covered open space, was what was left of a brick chimney foundation, with shards of china and glass and handwrought nails scattered about. Clumps of a lily-like plant grew here and there, and we knew we had found the spot where the letters had been written over one hundred years ago. We took a few pictures, picked up a few pieces of pottery and some nails, and left satisfied that we had come full circle. This area is now, of course, Six Oaks Park.

Back once again in Lawrenceville, our lives resumed their ordered way. As time passed, however, we felt more and more the urge to move permanently to Hilton Head Island. The letters remained in our thoughts, but we felt we’d really have more time to study them after we had begun the “leisurely life” of retirement on the Island so they stayed in a box in a closet.

Not until after we came to live permanently on the Island in 1971, did we

really consider working seriously on the letters. Curtiss finished reading them and occasionally talked of them to friends, who generally urged us to have them published. We learned there was little primary written history of the Island in existence, and began to feel we should seriously look at the letters to see if they did in fact have the historical value necessary for publication. After some prodding, Curtiss, with the aid of a hand lens, began to copy each letter, a long and arduous task. The more he read the more fascinated he became. I began to read his handwritten copies and felt they truly did provide a picture of life on the Island shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War.

We wrote to the University of South Carolina Press and asked if they might be interested in considering the letters

for publication. We received a rather casual reply, but it did contain a suggestion to contact the Director of the South Caroliniana Library. This we did, and Mr. Inabinet set up an appointment. We traveled to Columbia, where we met with him and Dr. Josephine Walker Martin, who had studied the history of the American Missionary Association in the context of her published history of education in South Carolina from 1862 to 1870. She and Mr. Inabinet were quite enthusiastic over both the content and the fact the letters were originals and agreed they would make an interesting book which would also contribute to the history of the period.

Below, *Islander* reader, you will find the text of the first letter Eliza Ann wrote from Hilton Head Island. *Islander* magazine has elected to pub-

lish this letter in the month of January, the first month of the Bicentennial Year. It seems fitting to us that Eliza Ann's letter be shared with other Islanders in this most important month, the 109th anniversary of its writing. This is the first time any of the letters have been shared with the public. *Islander* will publish a few others, and we hope, in the near future, we can arrange for publication of a book containing the complete set. It is our hope that we may, in this small way, shed new light on the lives of those left here by the tides of war and those who came to minister to them. For you who know and love the Island, we hope the letters will become an adventure into part of the history of this place as told to you by Eliza Ann Summers (Hitchcock) exactly as she lived it on Hilton Head Island in the year 1867.

Jan. 24th, 1867
Lawton Plantation, S. C.

Dear Sister,

We are seated in our own parlor, on our own plantation all alone, but I will tell you more about this (our home I mean) by & by. I will now commence my story from the time I left Charleston.

I believe I told you about my visit there. Well, the carriage came for us at Mr. Cardoza's at half past six and took ourselves and baggage to the boat, called the Pilot Boy. We took breakfast & dinner on the boat. There were several passengers on the boat, some bound for Savannah and some for Florida, but the funniest

part of it was every one on board seemed to know all about us, where we were from and where we were going, what for and all but our names. We went by several places and Forts. Fort Sumpter and Fort Pinkney after a while.

We noticed that we were attracting considerable attention, so we went out on deck. Very soon a

gentleman brought us out some seats and after we had accepted them he says you are teachers, to which we replied in the affirmative. Then he says from the North, we gave him the same answer. Then he went on you are going to Hilton Head. In this way he questioned us until finally he said Capt.

West had told him about us (you remember who he was, the one we sailed with from N. Y.). Then the mystery was unfolded for we had seen him talking with several of the other passengers. After we went inside a lady from Mass. asked us nearly the same questions, then said she was sorry to see us two young ladies going out on such a thankless object. She said it was a mistaken philanthropy. She was a

real secesh. She was on her way to Florida to spend the winter.

Before we reached Beaufort we ran aground on a sand bar and had to stay still over an hour for the tide to wash us off. After reaching Beaufort the Capt. said we had half an hour to wait. So one of the gentlemen proposed we went ashore, so



Sprucebank Farm, Woodbury, Conn. the house Eliza Ann lived in prior to her visit to the Island.



The F. F. Hitchcock house as it is today. This is the house in which the letters were found.

nearly all of the passengers started off for a walk. Julia & I started off together but two gentlemen came after us and offered their services. The one that went with me was a Mr. Langdon, the proprietor of the hotel here. The one with J. we can not find out his name, but it was the one who was so inquisitive in the morning. He is to spend the summer here on the Island, but we do not expect to see him again for he was going off in another direction. We had a very pleasant walk but walked very fast for fear the boat would leave us. We reached Hilton Head at seven. Both of the gentlemen offered to take care of us and baggage if Mr. Wright were not there to meet us. Mr.

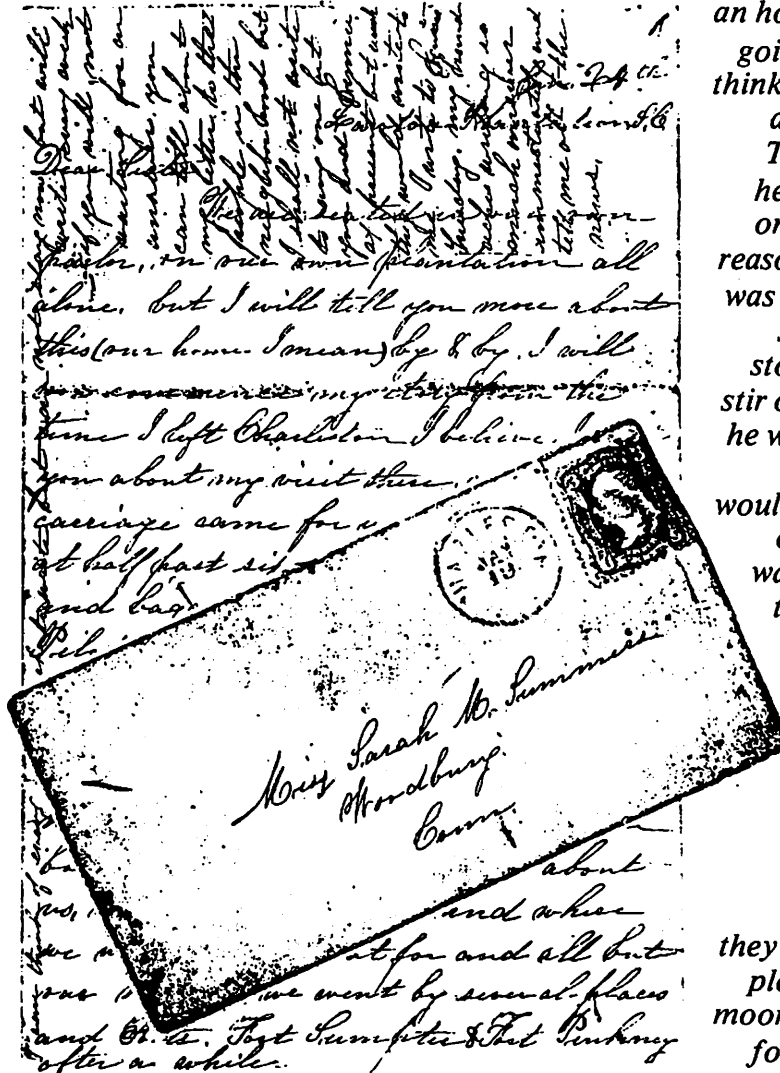
Langdon invited us to go to his house and stay all night and in the morning he would take us to the Wrights, but Mr. W. was there and Mr. L. took our baggage and sent it to us the next day. He was very urgent to have Mr. W. and us stop and take tea with him and get warm, but we concluded we would not. We were tired and wanted to get to our journey's end and as the teachers' home was not far from there we trudged along and soon came to it, a little bit of a house with a single thickness of boards for sides and floors, not a bit of whitewash or plaster on the whole house and spaces between the boards on the sides wide enough so the birds fly through. Every house on the Island stands on posts so that the air can circulate under and there is not a single cellar here. Neither is there in Charleston. The garet is considered the coolest place in the South. The houses here look like barns on stilts, but the teachers home is so small and light that the slightest wind shakes it and J. & I were actually afraid to stay in it for fear it would blow over and most of the teachers there feel just as we did about it. One day we were there and were

writing the house shook so we could hardly make a straight mark. This is a true picture of the teachers home. Here stay five teachers beside the Matron, Mr. Wright and one servant making eight in all, besides J. and I for a few days.

We reached the Home as I said before on Friday night at seven. Saturday we had a sort of a party, a kind of a reception for us and a surprise for the Seabrook girls. Seabrook is a plantation five miles from the Home. Mr. Wright had the forepart of the week fitted them out for housekeeping. So on Saturday he got all the teachers on the Island (seventeen in number) together and carrying our own provisions started on our surprise. J. & I went

in an ambulance in which were six others. We were an hour and three quarters going five miles. I rather think that was rather going ahead of Fannies time. The roads are so sandy here that the horses can only walk. But then the reason of our slow driving was one of the horses was so stubborn, it would stop still and would not stir one step and the more he whipped it the stiller it would stand, only it would kick at every stroke of the whip. The only way to start it at all was to have a colored man push and another to pull at the bits and pinch its ear. They were horses belonging to the Government and real old poor ugly things, but coming home they came very well and a pleasant ride we had by moonlight, but I must not forget to tell you about the dinner. We had roast

beef, oysters, baked beans, sweet and Irish potatoes, apple and mince pies, pickles, cheese, apples, raisins, fish and some other things. We thought we would have a dinner in style for once at least. Sunday they had no preaching here but I went to



Typical envelope from the collection and the first page of the January letter from Eliza to her sister.

Sunday School and had a class of sixteen. We sang four times and I had to lead everytime. It is something new for me but I have got to get used to it. In all the teachers there is only three or four that can sing at all. There were three unmarried men there as teachers and in the evening they all spent the evening with us at the home and we sang nearly all the time. The teachers attribute that call to Julia and I for in all the time they have been here they have only had a call from one white man (a great rarity here) and having three in one evening they can account for it in no other way. We are younger than most of the teachers, nearly all are old maids. Monday and Tuesday we made our towels and bedding for housekeeping and Mr. Wright bought our furniture and provisions. Wednesday we moved in three loads, we had two

grandfather Summers had, only a great deal higher with no steps. On the way we met one of the colored people that he knew. The woman says to him seems to me you be up high. Yes he says don't spect to be down low always. Specs to be up higher yet some day. He is very old and gray, but if we noticed a shell or anything he must clamber down from his high wagon and get it for us. There are some real curious things here on the beach called the sea biscuit. I mean to bring some home and some shells and moss, such beautiful moss hanging from the trees, forests of live oaks with moss trailing on the ground. They dry it here and take it to stuff pillows with. We have a husk bed and under pillows or bolsters.

Now I will tell you about our home. We first came in sight of the cabins, or quarters, as they



The site near Six Oaks Park of the Lawton Plantation house where Eliza Ann Summers lived and wrote her letters. (Photo by Bill Dibble)

carts full besides the one we rode in. We went on the beach for eight miles and a beautiful drive it was too. Coney Island beach is not to be compared with it. On one side of us the broad ocean, on the other nothing but forests of Pine & Palmetto trees. Then such beautiful birds and we saw a very large white bald headed eagle and an eagles' nest.

Old Uncle March carried us out in his cart and he talked about everything, and pointed out lots of places and plantations and told us stories about them and when he met any of the colored people he seemed so proud to be carrying the white misses to ride. He usually rides in a little old cart very low, but yesterday he must get a very high one that he had painted green and in shape like the one that

call them here. I should think there was as many as fifty of them around the house. The house itself is a story and a half as most of the plantation houses are in this country. It has four rooms on the first floor, all large and pleasant, with a hall running through the centre of it and stairs going up out of it. Two rooms upstairs and a wide piazza extends across the front. This house also is built up on posts like the rest of them. A very nice cistern of water is just back of the house. It is the best water I have had since I started from home, very cool and clear. I wish you could look in upon us to night and I should not need to describe it any further. The cheerful lamp and the bright fire in an open fireplace makes even these bare walls

pleasant. I should not say bare walls for what could be found more beautiful to decorate our walls than the mistletoe and red holly berries. We have quite enough to make us comfortable and expect even more when Mr. W. can get things from Charleston. I forgot to tell you about the mistletoe branch we went to see on Tuesday. Miss Clary, J. and I went to walk on the Drayton plantation, a beautiful place near the home, in search of the mistletoe bough. As we could not find it, we got an old colored man to show it to us. He said he wished he was smart enough to climb the tree for us and get us some, but he would get some one else if he could and send it to us. So the next morning before we were up there was a large quantity of it brought to us. It is a beautiful vine with white berries as clear as glass and grows in clusters like the currant. It grows out of oaks and pine trees and in cutting open the boughs of trees you will see little fine roots of the mistletoe bough running clear through the trunk and branches.

I must tell you about the slight scare we had first night we staid here. About two o'clock we were awakened by someone pounding at our door and as the outside door could not be fastened we knew that they were in the hall. We opened the bedroom window, unlatched the shutter thinking it might be daylight but found the moon still shining. I went to the door and spoke but no answers returned except by a noise like someone gasping. We knew then that it was some one intoxicated. We returned to bed and waited until we heard him go out. Then

we heard a number of voices and jumped up again and went to the window. We saw men and women passing so did not feel in the least afraid. In the morning a colored man who lives in speaking distance came in and asked us if we were disturbed. He said there was a boat came in from Savannah. The crew was almost all drunk. He said he got up, went down to the beach and dispersed them. As he went by our windows he heard one of us coughing so he knew we were awake and was afraid we would be frightened we so would not stay. He says if we are in the least afraid to open our window and call him. He is a very faithful trusty man and is so kind to us. Yesterday we asked him to sell us a pint of oysters for dinner. We sent over for them and he sent back as a present a large quart bowl even full of splendid oysters. These are the nicest oysters here I ever tasted in my life. He says he shall never take any pay for oysters and we can have them any time we choose.

I have not told you anything about our servant but will tell you in my next letter.

We do not commence school until Monday but our pay commences from the time we left New York.

I can think of ever so much to write but cannot stay now but will write every week if you will, not waiting for an answer. You can tell about my letter to the people in the neighborhood but I shall not write to any one but you and Jennie at present but wish they would write to me. I wrote to Jennie Tuesday. My hand aches writing so much. Answer immediately and tell me all the news.

