



The giant Talbird live oak inspires a young lady to do an impromptu dance with her shawl.

FROM PLAYGROUND TO BATTLEGROUND (AND BACK)

By Robert E. H. Peeples

Photographed by Candace Lovely

"The tree used to be my playground in my boyhood," wrote the Rev. Dr. Henry Talbird in May, 1888, from his home in Switzerland, Florida, to his cousin, Col. Nathaniel Henry Rhodes Dawson, a brother-in-law of President Abraham Lincoln. Dr. Talbird was born on the shore of Skull Creek in what is now Hilton Head Plantation on November 7, 1811, less than 150 yards from the giant live oak which still stands there in Talbird Field. Its story is stranger than fiction.

Known to botanists as *quercus virens*, or sometimes as *q. virginiana* where ancient groves of these strange and majestic oaks with their evergreen,

dark glistening foliage first impressed European explorers, the live oak is peculiar to the South Atlantic and Gulf coasts. It is easily the region's most distinctive tree, with its massive, moss-draped limbs which are prone to thrash about violently and occasionally to break during the high winds of autumn hurricanes. Contrary to popular fancy, the live oak is a tree of rapid growth. But once it achieves maturity, the gnarled and ponderous branches, the squat, thick, deeply-lined trunk, the rank growth of moss and tree ferns lend the appearance of unbelievable antiquity within a mere five or six decades.

The Talbird Oak is no such

youngster. It doubtlessly sheltered Yamasee Indians during their occupation of the Island, 1684-1715, because it was spared by the immigrant Henry Talbird, son of Sir James Talbot, Lord Mayor of Dublin. Sir James gave the 200-acre plantation to his younger son, John Talbird (1760-1825) in 1778 when he married Mary Ann Ladson, daughter of John Ladson who owned the plantation adjoining on the south.

In the reorganization of the Granville County Militia which followed the December, 1778, fall of Savannah, John Talbird was commissioned a lieutenant in the



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company commanded by his brother, Captain Thomas Talbird. On February 2, 1779, they helped their older half-brother, Captain James Doharty, in the demolition of Beaufort's Fort Lyttleton in the face of overwhelming British forces and quickly joined General Thomas Moultrie's army in resisting the British advance in the Battle of Port Royal. Their 17-year-old younger brother, Richard Talbird, was among the eight patriots who gave their lives in forcing the British to retreat to Savannah.

This American success encouraged the Continental commander, General Benjamin Lincoln, to dispatch General John Ashe across the Savannah River where his army was ignominiously routed at Briar Creek in early March. Talbird's company, then with General Moultrie at his Black Swamp headquarters, was forced to withdraw to Coosawhatchie when the British landed 2,000 regulars at Purrysburg. The attempt to deny the British a crossing of the Coosawhatchie and Tullifinny Rivers resulted in a further American defeat and the first general invasion of Beaufort District by the plundering British with their auxiliaries, the dreaded Indian savages whose custom was to murder all women and children after scalping them. Panic gripped the Low Country. Many militiamen were forced to return to their plantations to defend their families. Some were even forced to apply to the British for the protection which American arms could not provide. But not the Talbirds.

Captain Thomas Talbird's company continued to contest the British advance, retreating to the hastily-constructed defenses of Charles Town itself. The timely arrival of President John Rutledge from Orangeburg with his own Militia army and General Lincoln's laggard approach from Black Swamp induced the British to withdraw to James Island to utilize their naval superiority. Captain Talbird's company and other units of the Granville County Regiment camped on Johns Island.

One historian's account claims the British surprised an out-sentinel from whom they extorted the patriots' countersign. More reliable sources insist that a Barnwell relative, Col. Thomas Fenwick, actually betrayed the patriots. The result was a devastating surprise massacre in which our hero, Lt. John Talbird, was wounded and captured, his life saved by a sympathetic British soldier who dressed his wounds. Meanwhile, his brothers, Captain Thomas Talbird and Captain James Doharty, escaped capture and brought the news of her husband's imprisonment to Mary



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Ann Ladson Talbird here on Hilton Head. Then they fled into hiding at Captain Doharty's Bear Island Plantation, now part of Harry Cram's Foot Point Plantation on the mainland. There Doharty was discovered by "Tory Dick" Pendarvis who killed him.

Lt. John Talbird continued as a prisoner of war until after the fall of Charles Town in May, 1780, when he was paroled. He hastened to his Skull Creek home. There he had the joy of meeting his first-born son, John, born in the fall of 1779. He doubtlessly took shelter from the summer sun beneath the giant live oak in the field back of his house as he supervised the crops. He savored his freedom after his long imprisonment and yearned for peace. But there was no peace.

British naval power continued to dominate the Carolina coast. John was pressed to join the British in fighting his own surviving brothers and his fellow-countrymen—a course impossible for him. Under cover of darkness he made his way inland to join Colonel William Harden's regiment under the command of General Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox. In the changing fortunes of war Lt. John Talbird was again taken prisoner by the enemy but escaped the fate visited upon Colonel Isaac Hayne for breaking parole.

Back on Hilton Head Island his wife, Mary Ann Talbird, became a heroine. Her house servant ran up from the Skull Creek dock, shouting, "Soldiers, Missus! Coming ashore!"

"Get the others quickly and hide in the woods 'til I call you," was her instant reply as she hurried to her front piazza, young John held firmly by the hand. There she met a young British officer whom she instinctively invited to accept the hospitality of her home, offering to have refreshments prepared. The officer apologized that he was under orders to burn her house, as well as those of all other known rebels between Savannah and Beaufort. However, he added that he was well-acquainted with two of her older sisters who were married to faithful British officers. The house must be burned, he said, but because of his esteem for her sisters, he would spare all her furniture and belongings. These he ordered his men to pile beneath the giant live oak tree down in the field.

The British seized every servant and every horse they could find, transporting the former for sale to West Indian sugar planters. The horses were passed along to their cavalry units on the mainland.

After the soldiers had sailed away,

Mrs. Talbird called the 12 or 15 servants who had escaped capture by hiding in the woods beyond the live oak tree. She directed them in building several small shelters with roofs and sides of layered palmetto fronds, protection from the elements and camouflage from boats passing along Skull Creek.

In one of these primitive cabins she gave birth to her second son, Henry Talbird, named for his grandfather, on the very day the exhausted Lord Cornwallis, his army worn out and demoralized by the guerrilla torments of South Carolina's great Militia Generals: Marion, Sumter and Pickens as brilliantly commanded by President John Rutledge, tamely surrendered to an astonished George Washington at Yorktown on October 19, 1781. The following year Lt. John Talbird again returned to Hilton Head Island and met his second son. The Talbird Field live oak continued to serve as his children's playground.

Years later when young Henry (Yorktown) Talbird married a Savannah belle, Sarah Blakewood, whose father had been among the American patriots who avenged the death of Henry's uncle, Captain James Doharty, he brought her to Hilton Head Island as mistress of Talbird Plantation. His mother, the heroine Mary Ann Ladson Talbird, had long since been buried at Whale Branch Plantation, now called Clarendon, on Port Royal Island. Henry enlarged Talbird House to include an extensive library, as well as a chemical laboratory, both of which provided him much pleasure as an Islander. His own first-born son, who would become the Rev. Dr. Henry Talbird after completing his formal education at Madison University in New York, had the joy of sharing his grandfather's (Lt. John Talbird) golden years, listening again and again to the exciting tales of the Revolutionary War which swirled around Hilton Head and came ashore at the Talbird Field live oak beneath which they enjoyed many happy hours.

Lt. John Talbird was buried in 1825; his son, Captain Henry (Yorktown) Talbird in 1846, both in Whale Branch Cemetery. In 1861 the Rev. Dr. Henry Talbird also became Captain Talbird when he joined the 7th Alabama Regiment. The following year he became Colonel Talbird as he recruited and took command of the distinguished 41st Alabama Regiment. He lost his war and retired to Florida. Happily, he recorded the honor and the glory of the Talbird Field live oak.

Long may it reign in majesty to delight future generations of Islanders.

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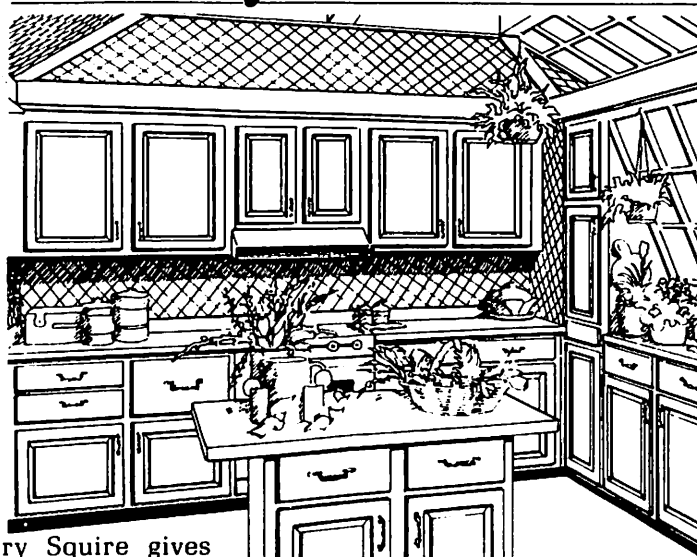


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The etereal beauty of the majestic Talbird oak is evident in this photo.