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HON. GEORGE RHODES

11 January 1802 - 2 October 1881

PLANTER, EDUCATOR, STATESMAN, CHURCHMAN

of

The Hermitage Plantation,

Lawtonville,

St. Peter's Parish, South Carolina

by

Rev. Robert E. H. Peeples

Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

1969



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Born 11 January 1802 - Died 2 October 1881

of The Hermitage Plantation, Lawtonville,
St. Peter's Parish, South Carolina.

From an original tintype made circa 1857 with
his daughter, Adelinda Gertrude, who later
married her cousin, Daniel Benjamin Rhodes.

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Hon. George Rhodes, Signer of the Ordinance of Secession, planter of The Hermitage Plantation, Lawtonville, St. Peter's Parish, Beaufort District, South Carolina, was born at his father's plantation on Calliwassi Island, St. Luke's Parish, on 11 January 1802, the first child of Thomas Rhodes and his second wife, Mary Elizabeth Cater.

Thomas Rhodes was born 22 ^{April} ~~September~~ 177⁵ at Bridgenorth, Shropshire, England, where he was baptized 14 May 1775, ^{second} ~~eldest~~ son of George Rhodes of that city and his wife, Elizabeth ("Betsy") Bache, who were married at the Church of St. Mary Magdalen, Bridgenorth, on 11 November 1772. This George Rhodes was a son of Nathaniel Rhodes of Bridgenorth and his wife, Harriet George. The Rhodes family has flourished in England from the time of William The Conqueror with whom two Rhodes brothers, Willimus and Hugh, hereditary knights of Flanders, entered as warriors in 1066. The Domesday Book records their grant of the "moiety of Rode". The village of Rode, seat of that original grant, is still located near Macclesfield in Cheshire. Hugh returned to Normandy as Comte de Rodez, founder of the Rodez family and town of Rodez, now capital of the Department of Aveyron in France. Willimus de Rhode left a son Michael de Rhodes whose descendants have been traced through more than thirty generations to the Rhodes family in neighboring Shropshire.

Thomas Rhodes immigrated to South Carolina about 1790 to join his uncle, John Rhodes, who was born in Bridgenorth 2 February 1747 and immigrated as a mere boy to South Carolina where he grew up to

2.
become a prosperous merchant of Charleston and Beaufort, planter of Whale Branch Plantation on Port Royal Island which he acquired by his marriage 11 June 1774 in St. Helena's Episcopal Church, Beaufort, to Mary, daughter of Henry Talbird. John Rhodes was appointed Sheriff of Beaufort District in 1776 by John Rutledge, President of the Colony of South Carolina. He held a commission as Lieutenant during the Revolutionary War, represented St. Helena's Parish in the South Carolina Legislature 1800 - 1804 and was for many years a Vestryman of St. Helena's Church. His son, Dr. Nathaniel Henry Rhodes, received his M.D. degree from Edinburgh in 1804 and in 1806 married Mary, daughter of His Excellency Paul Hamilton, Governor of South Carolina and later Secretary of the United States Navy. His daughter, Henrietta Rhodes, married on 30 May 1809 Paul Hamilton, Jr., M.D., brother of her brother's wife.

On 10 July 1795 Thomas Rhodes married in St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Charleston, Mary, daughter and heiress of the then late John Wright of Charleston, a planter. They settled in Beaufort District where Mary died, leaving two children: Thomas Wright Rhodes and Sarah Rhodes. Thomas Wright Rhodes later married Elizabeth Phoebe Jenkins, daughter of Col. John Jenkins, planter, of Edisto Island and his wife, Sarah Phoebe Chaplin. Their son, John Jenkins Rhodes, born 20 June 1821, was baptized in Prince William's Parish Church 27 Oct. 1831 by Rev. C. P. Elliott. Their son, Richard Wright Rhodes, was baptized at Cotton Hall Plantation 2 March 1834 by the Rev. William T. Potter, Rector of St. Helena's Church and second husband of Henrietta Rhodes Hamilton. Both baptisms are recorded in the Register of Prince William's Parish, Sheldon.

Thomas Rhodes married secondly, around 1799, Mary Elizabeth Cater, born 25 June 1776 at Cater Hall Plantation, St. Peter's Parish, resi-

dence of her father, Thomas Cater, planter, who held a commission as Captain during the Revolutionary War and represented St. Peter's Parish at the famous Jacksonboro Legislature of the State of South Carolina in 1782. Her mother was Rachel Miles, born 1755, died 1802, daughter of Captain Silas Miles, planter, of Poplar Springs Plantation, St. Paul's Parish, and his wife, Elizabeth, daughter of the famous Indian Fighter, James MacPherson, Captain of the South Carolina Rangers, who escorted and protected Gen. James Oglethorpe and his party of settlers from Beaufort to found the City of Savannah and Colony of Georgia on 12 February 1733. Thomas Cater, born 1751, was the only surviving child of Thomas Cater of Ashley River and his wife, Susannah, born 6 April 1731, daughter of Richard Baker, Esq. of Archdale Hall and his wife, Mary Bohun, daughter of Nicholas Bohun, planter, of St. Bartholomew's Parish, son of Edmund Bohun, Esq., first Chief Justice of South Carolina, and his wife, Margaret Bellinger, daughter of the 1st Landgrave Edmund Bellinger of Tomotley Barony, Surveyor General of Carolina. Chief Justice Edmund Bohun who died in the yellow fever epidemic in Charleston in October 1699 was a direct descendant of the de Bohun earls of Hereford, Essex and Northampton as well as of Prince Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, younger son of King Edward III of England.

Thomas Rhodes and Mary Elizabeth Cater were the parents of two other children, a daughter, Rachel Cater Rhodes, who married Ulysses Maner Robert of Robertville by whom she had seven children, including triplets, and a son, Nathaniel Henry Rhodes, who married Sarah Julia Haygood, sister of Thomas Haygood of Colleton County and of the family of Gen. Johnson Haygood. Nathaniel Henry Rhodes was the father of five children, including two sons who left descendants: Thomas Haygood Rhodes, born 4 Feb. 1832 who lived for awhile with his uncle, Hon. George Rhodes at The Hermitage Plantation and later with his aunt,

Mrs. Rachel Rhodes Robert in Georgia, and Nathaniel Henry Rhodes who married Belle Grayson and left eight children in Georgia.

On 23 January 1808 Thomas Rhodes was in Charleston to take the oath of naturalization by which he became a citizen of the United States. The following year the South Carolina Gazette in Charleston published his obituary, giving 25 April 1809 as the date of his death and identifying him as a nephew of John Rhodes of Beaufort who lived on until 4 October 1827.

Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Cater Rhodes, left with three small children and a plantation to manage, was still a widow in 1810 when she made her Census returns. Shortly thereafter she married Winborn Asa Lawton, son of Joseph Lawton, planter, of Mulberry Grove Plantation, Black Swamp, St. Peter's Parish, J.P. and the holder of a commission as Lieutenant during the Revolutionary War, and his wife, Sarah, daughter of Jacques de Bourdeaux Robert and his wife, Sarah Jaudon. Winborn Asa Lawton, later a Baptist minister and Pastor of Lawtonville Baptist Church, was then only 17 years old; Mary Elizabeth Cater Rhodes was 34 years old, a wealthy widow with 28 slaves and a plantation.

It was at this time that young George Rhodes was sent by his mother to her aunt, Mrs. Susannah Miles MacPherson, widow of Gen. John MacPherson, and to her cousin, Elizabeth Mary MacPherson, wife of the Hon. James Reid Pringle. This worthy in 1810 had 101 slaves with which he carried on extensive cotton planting in Prince William's Parish; he was later President of the Senate of South Carolina 1814-18, Collector of Customs for the Port of Charleston 1819 - 1840 and Mayor of Charleston in 1830. For his formal education the Pringles sent young George Rhodes to the famous school which Dr. Moses Waddell had founded in 1804 at Willington, county seat of Abbeville County. Dr. Waddell left the Willington Academy in 1819 to become President of Franklin College which later became the University of Georgia.

The Willington Academy had a reputation for thoroughness of instruction, severity of discipline, effectiveness of work of its students, and especially for the character of its director, Dr. Waddell. Among those enrolled were Hugh Swinton Legare, James L. Pettigru, John C. Calhoun, William H. Crawford, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, George McDuffie, Henry W. Collier and George R. Gilmer. the latter wrote of the Academy:

"That school fills my notion of what a boys' school ought to be: plain dressing, plain eating, hard working, close studying, close watching, and when needful, good whipping ... the best school in these United States."

The Academy was built on a ridge near some beech trees where the students sometimes carved their names. The boys stayed in boarding houses but had little log huts which in many cases they had built themselves, using them sometimes for recreation, sometimes for study. In cold weather they studied in these huts, in warm weather out doors where they enjoyed some freedom so long as they remained within call. Class succeeded class without definite hours for study or recreation. Curriculum emphasis was on the classics, especially Greek and Latin. The boys learned grammar and syntax so that the woods literally rang with the conjugation of Greek and Latin verbs and the declension of nouns. They quickly memorized the facts of Greek and Roman history and culture. The main building of the school stood at the head of the street and contained a large recitation room where "a solemn and appropriate prayer imploring the Eternal in their behalf began and ended the exercises of each day". It was also used for the court and general convocation over which Dr. Waddell himself always presided. It contained no seats but easily held 150 boys standing erect. The Debating Club met on Friday afternoons and

was considered highly important.

The students arose with the sun and retired at 9PM without fail; they chopped the wood necessary to maintain the fires to keep themselves warm in winter. On Sunday mornings they hunted squirrels and turkeys before Church and on Sunday evenings went after possums and coons.

The Willington Academy examinations attracted many prominent South Carolina and Georgia visitors who often joined in quizzing the students. Oratory composed the second part of the examinations while two dramatic pieces, a comedy and a farce, made up the third. John C. Calhoun, whose sister Dr. Waddell married, once said, "I have visited many schools conducted according to various systems of education, but nowhere have I witnessed such emulation to excell."

Meanwhile, George Rhodes' step-father had settled in Robertville in 1811 where he was ordained ^{in 1819} to the Baptist ministry. There his wife bore him four children: Winborn Benjamin Lawton, born 1 August 1812; Mary Cater Lawton, born 12 November 1813; Alexander Robert Lawton, born 22 June 1815 and Narcissa Melissa Lawton, born 1817. Apparently the Rev. Winborn Asa Lawton assisted his older brother, Benjamin T. D. Lawton, in engaging a suitable instructor for the newly-founded Lawtonville Academy in the person of his step-son. For although he was only eighteen, George Rhodes undertook the work, instructing girls as well as boys.

The following year George Rhodes married on 15 November 1821, in the midst of his second year at Lawtonville Academy, Thursa Evelina Robert, born 4 September 1803, the eighteen year old daughter of ~~the~~ ^{Deacon} ~~Pastor~~ Rev. James Jehu Robert, planter, of St. Peter's Parish, ~~Pastor~~ of the Robertville Baptist Church for more than fifty years, and his first wife, Charlotte Anne Lawton, his first cousin, daughter of Joseph Lawton, Esq., planter, of Mulberry Grove Plantation, and his wife

Sarah Robert. ~~The Rev.~~ James Jehu Robert was the son of John Robert, founder of Robertville, and his wife, Elizabeth Dixon, daughter of Captain Thomas Dixon, planter, of James Island, and his wife, Elizabeth Smith, granddaughter of the First Landgrave Thomas Smith, Governor of Carolina in 1693.

Upon reaching his majority early in 1823 George Rhodes received his paternal inheritance, laid aside the teaching profession and began prospering as a planter, slaveholder and merchant. He established his seat at the Hermitage Plantation on former Robert family landholdings approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles southeast of Lawtonville. His mother died on 25 February 1823 and ^{was} buried in the Robert Cemetery northeast of Robertville beside two of her deceased infants.

George Rhodes' first child, born 27 December 1823, was named James Pringle in tribute to his prominent Charleston relative who had assisted him so generously more than a decade earlier. George and Thursa called the baby "James" and proudly presented him to all their many relatives. Two daughters, Sarah Cater and Mary Charlotte were born on 22 January 1826 and 22 April 1828.

Then tragedy struck in the late summer of 1828 when the lovely young wife and mother, Thursa, died near her ^{12 January 1828} 25th birthday, with ^{Sarah, one of} ~~both~~ her infant daughters, victims of typhoid fever. It is said that after the mass funeral George was comforted by his father-in-law who there and then persuaded him to remain in the family by marrying his younger daughter, the sixteen-year-old Eliza Jane, born 30 January 1810.

After a proper interval of mourning the wedding did indeed take place at Christmas 1828 and on 5 January 1829, ^{Deacon} ~~the Rev.~~ James Jehu Robert made a deed of two male and five female slaves to his cousin, Col. Alexander J. Lawton "in trust for the use and support of my daughter, Eliza Jane Robert Rhodes, wife of George Rhodes, and any children she might have".



ELIZA JANE ROBERT RHODES

Born 30 January 1812 - Died 11 January 1867

Daughter of ^{Deacon} ~~the Rev.~~ James Jehu Robert
and his first wife, Charlotte Anne Lawton;
second wife of Hon. George Rhodes of
The Hermitage Plantation, Lawtonville,
St. Peter's Parish, South Carolina.

From a photograph made circa 1852.

Two sons, George Milton and Theodore Augustus were born 17 October 1829 and 18 January 1832. The first daughter arrived 5 August 1833 and was named Thursa Evelina in tribute to her deceased aunt.

The 1830 Census shows George Rhodes owning five male and thirteen female slaves. By that date he had joined his wife's denomination, giving up the Episcopal Church of his youth and his family which was not then organized in the Lawtonville area. For in 1831 he was elected a deacon in Pipe Creek Baptist Church which moved to Lawtonville around 18~~30~~²⁶ and changed its name to Lawtonville Baptist Church in 1884.

A third son, named Joseph Nathaniel for Lawton and Rhodes grandfathers, arrived 5 December 1835 and was followed by two daughters, Henrietta Eugenia on 8 December 1837 and Phoebe Miranda on 28 September 1839. A fourth son, named Thomas Willingham for George Rhodes' friend and neighboring planter, arrived 1 June 1841. He was followed by a daughter, Rachel Minerva, called "Minnie", on 18 July 1843 and a fifth son, named Jehu Robert for his prominent grandfather, on 13 February 1845. The 1840 Census shows how much George Rhodes had prospered, for his slave holdings had increased to 25 male and 25 female.

George Rhodes' oldest son, James Pringle, married his cousin, Margaret Polhill Lawton, on 17 December 1846 and settled in the Erwinton area, some twenty miles north along the stagecoach road. James named his ~~second~~ son, born 18 January 1852, George Augustus, in proud tribute to his father. This was George Rhodes' ~~third~~ grandchild. His father-in-law, ^{Diacon} Rev. James Jehu Robert, died the following day, 19 January 1852, in ^{Marietta, Ga. where he was buried.} ~~Robertville~~. James Pringle Rhodes died 29 October 1853, less than two months from his thirtieth birthday.

The Hermitage family was augmented by the arrival of five additional daughters: Adelinda Gertrude on 20 March 1847, Rosalind on 15 November 1848, Juliana Cora on 15 May 1850, Eliza Jane, called "Lila", on 6

October 1852 and finally, Ida Matilda on 28 November 1856. But even the joy brought by this last arrival could not dispel the sadness occasioned by the untimely deaths of George Rhodes' third son, Joseph Nathaniel on 7 August 1856 at the promising age of twenty, and the lovely Henrietta Eugenia on 24 August, only eighteen. As the family prepared for her funeral on 25 August, word came down from his second floor bedroom of the death of Thomas Willingham, a bright, attractive lad of fifteen. All died of typhoid fever.

After the long winter of 1856-57, joy returned to The Hermitage with the gala double wedding on 9 April 1857 of Thursa Evelina, eldest daughter of the family, and her sister, Phoebe Miranda, to their handsome young cousins, John Jenkins Rhodes and Richard Wright Rhodes, sons of George Rhodes' older half-brother, Thomas Wright Rhodes, planter, of Prince William's Parish. Phoebe Miranda Rhodes and her infant child died less than a year later at its birth on 20 January 1858; her grieving young husband, Richard Wright Rhodes was killed some two years afterward by a runaway slave.

In 1860 George Rhodes, then 58, made his Census returns, valuing his real estate at \$35,000 and his 63 slaves at \$60,000. His wife, Eliza Jane, was then 50, mistress of an elegant southern plantation home boasting floor-to-ceiling pier mirrors, chased brass fireplace fenders and window cornices, crystal chandeliers, mahogany furniture and silver service. Her six remaining daughters, "Minnie" 17, Adeline 15, Rosalind 11, Juliana 9, "Lila" 7 and Ida 4, did their best to spoil their one brother still at home, Jehu Robert, an independent thirteen year old.

That fall George Rhodes was elected, with another large planter, Langdon Cheves, to represent St. Peter's Parish in the Convention of the People of South Carolina called to consider relations with the federal government. The Convention opened on Monday, 17 December 1860

in Columbia but adjourned to Charleston because of a smallpox epidemic. George Rhodes was in Charleston when the Convention reopened and boldly signed his name to the almost unanimously adopted Ordinance of Secession which dissolved the Union by withdrawing South Carolina therefrom. He preserved the gold pen with which he signed the document and it remains among his relicts. A few months later the War Between the States began with the Confederate occupation of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

The War brought inevitable changes to The Hermitage family. Theodore Augustus, known in the family as "Teedie", already a planter in his own right, enlisted as Sergeant of Company A, First South Carolina Regiment and fought his way through the Virginia campaigns and into Pennsylvania. There he was killed in action near the Bliss Plantation on 3 July 1863 in the Battle of Gettysburg. After the War his remains were brought back to his native South Carolina and interred in the Confederate Memorial Park, Magnolia Cemetery, Charleston, where his monument stands. His younger brother, Jehu Robert, served with the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery of which their brother-in-law, John Jenkins Rhodes, was 1st Lieutenant.

Then the unthinkable happened. Savannah was surrendered to federal forces on 21 December 1864 and it became obvious that South Carolina would be subjected to the catastrophic debacle of hate-filled looters' plundering and burning the countryside. In late January 1865 the left wing of Sherman's undisciplined mob crossed the Savannah River at Sisters Ferry and totally destroyed the lovely village of Robertville, burning St. Peter's Episcopal Church, ^{built in 1859} the Robertville Baptist Church, the Robertville Academy and every residence they encountered.

George Rhodes and his family were forced to refugee ahead of the lawless mob which Sherman then openly admitted he made no effort to restrain. As a Signer of the Ordinance of Secession, George Rhodes'

life would have been instantly forfeited had he fallen into the hands of the notorious "Little Kil". In utmost haste the family silver and a few other valuables were packed and the family fled up the stagecoach road towards Augusta. In Beech Island the trunk containing the silver disappeared, probably with the connivance of one of the servants, and was never seen again.

The Hermitage family continued to Forsythe, Georgia and refugeed there with George Milton Rhodes, their oldest surviving son. George Rhodes' half-sister, Narcissa Melissa Lawton, since May 1861 the widow of her cousin, Alexander B. Lawton, was still in residence at her ~~six thousand~~ ^{twenty-~~four~~ hundred} acre plantation, Summer Oaks, near Thomasville, but this was too far south of Forsythe for The Hermitage family to venture. Anyhow, with the undisciplined federal forces' burning of Columbia and passing on into North Carolina, it was important that George Rhodes and his family return to Lawtonville to salvage whatever remained.

There was little left. The Hermitage and its numerous outbuildings, the cotton gin, the slave cottages, were all burned except for a carriage house where they were forced to camp while a modest home was being built. Horses, cattle, sheep, chickens, geese, all had been stolen or deliberately destroyed by the invaders. There was scarcely food sufficient to maintain them until crops could be planted and harvested. The new home rose slowly. All the lumber had to be hauled from Brighton where a sawmill had been reestablished, at the then almost prohibitive price of \$80 per thousand board feet. The basement floor which included the kitchen and servants quarters had to remain unpaved and unfloored for several years due to the unavailability of bricks and cement.

George Rhodes was never an athletic man, leaning more towards the scholarly and cultural things of life. But at the then advanced age

of 63 he was forced to grip the plough handle which before he had only seen in the hands of lesser men. The hardships which The Hermitage family were compelled to endure were too severe for Eliza Jane Robert Rhodes, for in ^{January} 1867 she died, leaving George Rhodes a widower for the second time. One might suspect that he would have become bitter and resentful of the unwarranted hardships and misfortune visited upon him. But such was not the case. George Rhodes continued to love and serve his family, his Church and his community, despite the loss of his youth, his strength, his health and much of his fortune. His daughter, Adelinda Gertrude, known as "Addie", married Daniel Benjamin Rhodes, another of the sons of Thomas Wright Rhodes, and settled in The Hermitage as its new mistress while her husband supervised the plantation and eventually purchased it ^{in Sept. 1881} just before his father-in-law's death. George Rhodes took for his use the small bedroom at the right rear of the house from the window of which he could watch the sunsets over his broad fields. There he lived calmly, enjoying his books and his memories, savoring his daily after-dinner plantation-made peach brandy. From thence he sallied forth every Sunday to worship his Creator and Sustainer in the midst of his family and friends in ^{Pipe Creek} ~~Lawtonville~~ Baptist Church. And there in The Hermitage he died quietly on 2 October 1881, almost an octogenarian, known and loved and honored by the entire community. He was laid to rest beside his second wife, Eliza Jane Robert, in Lawtonville Cemetery where his tombstone, erected by his loving daughter, Eliza Jane, "Lila", who had married her cousin, John Williamson Peeples, on 8 April 1869, still stands.

A marble memorial tablet on the south wall of Lawtonville Baptist Church, Estill, reads:

Hon. George Rhodes
 B. 1802 - D. 1881
 Deacon of This Church
 50 Years.

NOTES

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50. South Carolina Historical Magazine, Vol. LIV, p. 102.
51. Ibid.
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59. Ralph Wooster, Membership of The South Carolina Secession Convention, South Carolina Historical Magazine, Vol. LV, pp. 185-197.
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